

Table 9.5

Questions or Tests to Pose When Critically Analyzing Perceptual Evidence

1. Directness of the report:
Is this account based on direct perception, or does it come second-, third-, or fourth-hand? If the latter, is it therefore to be treated with caution as fact, even if it is accurate as image?

 2. Spatial location of the reporter:
Even if firsthand, was my (or my reporter's) spatial location such that this perception might be accurate in some respects but still skewed or partial?

 3. Social locational skewing of reported opinion:
With regard to reports of opinion, what might there be about the relation between me and the reporter that might lead him or her to lie, distort, omit, falsely elaborate, or otherwise be less than accurate?

 4. Self-serving error and bias concerning reports:
From what I know on other grounds about my own or the reporter's commitments, values, and announced biases, are there reasons to be suspicious of the content of this report? Does it fit all too conveniently with what I want to believe, or what the reporter might want to believe, about people and events? That is, is it self-serving and therefore to be regarded with caution?

 5. Previous plain error in reports:
From what is known about my or the reporter's previous perceptions, am I an accurate observer/listener? Is the reporter? Have I or the reporter made errors in the past, even though these are not self-serving errors?

 6. Internal consistency of the report:
Is this report consistent within itself? Are there spatial-temporal factors stated at one point that contradict spatial-temporal assertions at other points? Were the events of this report possible within the time and space constraints given in the report or known about on other grounds? Do the people involved unaccountably contradict themselves within this report?

 7. External consistency; agreement among independent reports:
Is this account consistent with other accounts of the same events or experiences? Have I assembled enough independent accounts, subjected them to the above questions, and then compared them for degree of agreement? On points of remaining disagreement, have I made sufficient effort to speak with more participants in the event or persons involved in the experience – persons who are otherwise qualified reporters – in order to arrive at a truthful account?
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SOURCE: J. Lofland and L.H. Lofland (1984), *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 2nd edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth), p. 51. © 1984. Reprinted with permission of Wadsworth, an imprint of the Wadsworth Group, a division of Thomson Learning. Fax 800-730-2215.