

# Smiles Talk! Determining Credibility in Eyewitness Testimony

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## Abstract

Witness testimony continues to be an important part of jury decision making. The current study examined the effects of randomly assigned fake or real smiles in a mock witness task on juror perceptions of witness credibility. Although the data did not reveal a significant difference pertaining to the main hypothesis, further analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between agreeableness in jurors and perceptions of witness credibility.

## Introduction

In a courtroom, the judge or jury is responsible for making a decision of whether a witness is credible or not. This witness testimony can be the difference between verdicts in a case. Although jurors should only focus on the content of the testimony, it is natural for jurors to concentrate on non-verbal cues during a testimony (Nagle, Brodsky, & Weeter, 2014).

### Purpose:

- Determine if facial expressions (i.e. smile) can be detected by jurors
- Does this sway their decision about a verdict?

### Hypotheses:

- A real smile will elicit a higher overall rating of credibility

## Methodology

### Participants:

- 18 males, 35 females ( $M_{Age} = 19.72$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 2.17$ )

### Measures:

- BFI personality questionnaire (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008)
  - I am someone who...
- WCS (Brodsky, Griffith, & Cramer, 2010)
  - Likeability (Unfriendly versus Friendly)
  - Trustworthiness (Dishonest versus Honest)
  - Knowledgeable (Uneducated versus Educated)
  - Confidence (Not Confident versus Confident)
- Video of eyewitness testimony
- Manipulation check questions

## Methodology (cont'd)

### Procedure:

1. Participants completed a personality questionnaire assessing their characteristics of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.
2. Next, participants viewed a short video of an eyewitness testimony and answered questions about it using the Witness Credibility Scale.
3. Participants answered questions to determine if they saw the witness smile during the testimony and if they thought the smile was fake or real. They then made a decision if they thought the defendant was guilty.
4. Questions at the end of the study were used to determine if participants understood the content. A picture was shown depicting a fake smile and a real smile. Participants were tasked with determining which one was real.



Figure 1: Manipulation Check Picture

## Results

- The hypothesis that real smiles would elicit higher credibility ratings was not supported,  $t(65) = -0.67$ ,  $p = .504$ , with WCS scores very similar between real and fake smile conditions.
- Further exploratory analyses were performed to see which variables might predict credibility ratings.
- A significant correlation was discovered between the personality trait "agreeableness" and perceptions of witness credibility (Figure 2),  $r(67) = .26$ ,  $p = .035$ .

## Results (cont'd)

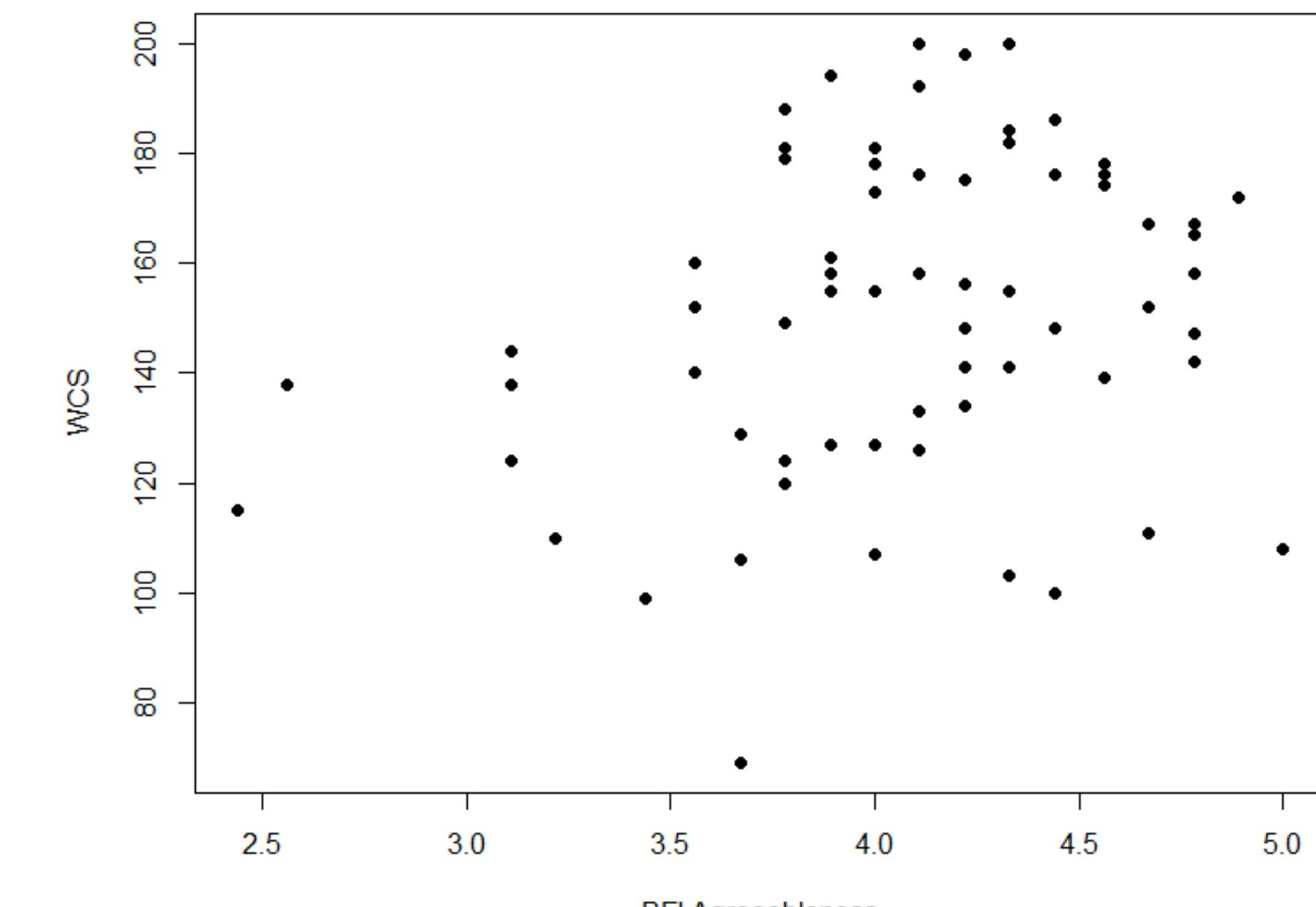


Figure 2: Agreeableness and WCS

## Discussion

Research in jury decision making offers an important overlap between theoretically motivated psychological research and the real world application to our legal system. Research examining the credibility of eyewitness testimony, not based on accuracy of memory, but on perceptions of credibility, is an important area of inquiry.

**Conclusion:** It was hypothesized that testimony from an individual displaying a real smile would lead to higher perceptions of their credibility than the same testimony from someone demonstrating a fake smile. This was found to not be supported. However, it was discovered that the personality trait of agreeableness was a unique predictor of witness credibility.

## References

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