

MODEL RESPONSES FOR CHAPTER IV: SOURCES

Exercise Set 4.1: Identifying biased sources

Model Responses for Exercise 1

Example of a strong response to this exercise

The employees at a major electronics store chain may be biased sources. They may tell you to buy the warranty, even if it is mostly unnecessary, if they get bonuses or other perks for selling warranties and other add-ons.

At least, you'd want to ask the salesperson some pointed and specific questions, like how frequently appliances like the one you are buying actually break.

Example of a weak response to this exercise

A good friend who bought the extended warranty on a new television is a biased source. He or she is just going to tell you to buy the warranty to avoid looking stupid by admitting that the warranty is not worth buying.

This response exaggerates an otherwise legitimate concern about bias. Most people don't like to admit to making a mistake. If your friend now thinks that buying the warranty was a mistake, he or she may not like to admit it. This minor bias, though, is probably overcome by the fact that this person is your good friend. A good friend presumably cares more about helping you than about admitting a mistake.

This holds a larger lesson. Lots of people have minor biases on any given issue. This doesn't necessarily disqualify them as impartial sources. The question is whether their interest in telling you the truth outweighs whatever minor biases they may have.

Model Response for Exercise 3

The president of one of the top-ranked universities in the United States is a biased source. Part of a university president's job is to promote that university, and so no matter what he or she really thought, the president of a top-ranked university is going to insist that his or her university is the best.

Model Responses for Exercise 5

One biased source would be a celebrity who gets a lot of money and publicity by writing books about how vaccines weaken children's immune systems. Such a celebrity would have a lot to lose by acknowledging that vaccines don't weaken children's immune systems.

The kind of celebrity described in this response is a classic case of someone with a strong financial incentive to push for a particular answer to the question. Vaccine manufacturers would be too.

Some people are tempted to say that pediatricians are a biased source on this topic. After all, pediatricians make money by providing medical services, and vaccines are one kind of medical service. Furthermore, if vaccines really did weaken children's immune systems, that would provide pediatricians with more business in the future, since their patients would be more likely to get sick in the future. People sometimes make similar kinds of arguments about public health researchers who study vaccines—or about scientists who study other controversial topics, such as climate change. The thinking is that those scientists want to reach a particular conclusion (e.g., that vaccines are safe or that climate change is dangerous) in order to keep the grant money flowing.

But money is not the only thing that motivates people. Professional and social norms matter, too. In medicine, those norms require doctors to promote their patients' health—and even more importantly, not to harm their patients. The overwhelming majority of pediatricians recommend or even insist that parents vaccinate their children. If vaccines were actually dangerous, this would mean that most of the medical profession had turned its back on one its core values. Likewise, the norms in science require researchers to pursue the truth rather than a politically predetermined answer. These sorts of norms are crucial to protecting the integrity of medicine and science, and so even though there are surely some bad eggs who violate those norms, most doctors and scientists take them very seriously.

In short, when you're thinking about whether a source counts as biased, you'll need to balance these sorts of motivations against other kinds of incentives.

Model Response for Exercise 7

A politician who is running for office on a strong anti-abortion platform is a biased source. Such a politician may exaggerate the likelihood of complications for two reasons. First, if the politician can convince you that abortion is dangerous, you may be more likely to

Model Responses for Exercise Set 4.1

support his or her campaign. Second, anti-abortion candidates may be reluctant to say anything that sounds like a concession to supporters of abortion rights, since highly ideological voters might interpret that as being "soft on abortion." Single-issue politicians have a special incentive to exaggerate, even more so in the heat of a campaign.

Notice that this response does not say that all politicians are biased sources on this question or they are insincere in their beliefs. Instead of condemning an entire group, the response specifies that politicians running on a "strong anti-abortion platform" would not count as impartial sources on this subject. The same goes, of course, for politicians running on a strong pro-choice platform.

Model Responses for Exercise 9

Example of a strong response to this exercise

The principal of a struggling private school is a biased source. Since the school would benefit from school vouchers, and this particular principal's school is in need of financial help, the principal has a clear incentive to get you to believe that vouchers would improve education.

Example of a weak response to this exercise

A biased source would be a university researcher who published a research paper showing that school vouchers would improve education. He or she wouldn't want to be proven wrong.

The second response makes another common mistake. Some people think that anyone who has taken a position in a debate is automatically a biased source. Unless you have some specific reason to think otherwise, however, it's reasonable to assume that the researcher has reached his or her conclusion based on a careful assessment of the evidence, not on the basis of personal bias. Being biased is not the same as having a view on an issue; being biased is having a view that is determined by something other than good reasons.