

PLAUSIBILITY

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My views on plausibility

Plausibility usually revolves around the question of why and how individuals regard certain beliefs as real or true. So, if one were to pose a question regarding a specific belief, the answer could be constructed in three ways, namely: a *possible* answer, a *correct* answer or a *credible* answer.

There are some answers that can be verified simply and thereby proven to be either possible or correct. Our interest here are the answers to more complex questions, (the 'Here be Dragons' or 'unknown unknowns') where the answer will be at best "credible and convincing, with the answer provided in such a way that its cogency is recognizable" – or not. According to Rescher (2009) a response that is not acceptable to its audience and cannot secure confidence is no answer at all.

Plausibility means worthy of confidence or trust, the root of the word being derived from the Latin *plausibilis*, i.e. deserving applause. Plausibility does not necessarily imply correctness. A plausible claim can be proven to be false, and an implausible answer can turn out to be true. So, how to achieve plausibility? This will depend on three factors, namely: the perceptions of the audience regarding the specific issue, the perceived trustworthiness of the organisation or authorities responsible for the issue in question as well as the message regarding the issue and its meaning. The combination of these three factors will require different trust thresholds.

To me, what is intriguing about plausibility is that all three factors can be characterised as a single issue - trust. Trust is the lubricant that facilitates social interactions and defines the social context. Ultimately, the level of social trust will dictate the level of plausibility surrounding an issue. Trust can be defined in a variety of ways, as can its constituent dimensions. These include: openness, reliability, integrity, credibility, fairness, caring and competence (Cvetkovich & Löfstedt, 1999). These dimensions will vary across societies globally, exacerbated by signal events, the media and civil society, the politics of fear and control. What is interesting is that in modern pluralistic societies forced to coexist with groups with alternative worldviews and values, trust becomes harder to find and keep – and therefore, plausibility is also likely to become even harder to obtain.

I believe that the key lies in trust nurturing, trust building and careful communication. To many in authority, trust is taken for granted, as something stable and static that can be relied on as societies grapple with transformative change. However, trust is simply a 'slow variable' – slow and laborious to build, and fast and simple to lose (Slovic, 1993/2000).