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Personal Narratives Build Trust Across Ideological Divides

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Lack of trust is a key barrier to collaboration in organizations and is exacerbated in contexts when employees subscribe to different ideological beliefs. Across five preregistered experiments, we find that people judge ideological opponents as more trustworthy when opposing opinions are expressed through a self-revealing personal narrative than through either data or stories about third parties—even when the content of the messages is carefully controlled to be consistent. Trust does not suffer when explanations grounded in self-revealing personal narratives are augmented with data, suggesting that our results are not driven by quantitative aversion. Perceptions of trustworthiness are mediated by the speaker's apparent vulnerability and are greater when the self-revelation is of a more sensitive nature. Consequently, people are more willing to collaborate with ideological opponents who support their views by embedding data in a self-revealing personal narrative, rather than relying on data-only explanations. We discuss the implications of these results for future research on trust as well as for organizational practice.

Keywords: narratives, sensitive self-disclosure, trust, collaboration

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Trust plays a fundamental role in our personal, professional, and civic lives: It facilitates cooperation (McAllister, 1995) and increases the likelihood of reaching agreements (Valley et al., 1998). Organizations benefit in many ways when trust is present and suffer when it is absent (see Kramer, 1999 for a review). Indeed, lack of trust can motivate retaliation (Bies & Tripp, 1996) and lead to the collapse of entire firms (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). The centrality of trust for organizations was perhaps best captured by Arrow (1974), who called it the "lubricant of a social system."

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Prior research has demonstrated that people have a difficult time trusting those with whom they disagree on important, identity-relevant beliefs (Hernández-Lagos & Minor, 2020). Indeed, as society has come to be characterized by more bitter and rancorous partisan polarization (Dimock et al., 2014; Klein, 2020), people have grown weary of evidence for ideologically opposing views, even when the evidence comes from highly reputable sources (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). These dynamics may negatively impact workplace productivity because coworkers often need to collaborate with, take advice from, and make decisions with individuals whom they know hold opposing perspectives.

In the present work, we investigate the effect of sharing self-revealing personal narratives (SRPNs) on the ability to establish trust across ideological disagreement. We theorize and find that stories that divulge an action or event that humbles the storyteller increase perceptions of trustworthiness by making the speaker appear vulnerable. In the following sections, we discuss the challenge of ideological disagreement in organizations and develop our theory for why SRPNs signal vulnerability and enhance trust and willingness to collaborate. We then review the prior literature on the role of narratives in disagreement more broadly and present five preregistered studies testing our theorizing.

Ideological Disagreement in Organizations

Challenges of political polarization that plague civic life increasingly permeate workplace interactions. Research demonstrates that people prefer to receive task advice from someone who shares their political views (Marks et al., 2019) and workers demand a higher wage from opposing party employers (McConnell et al., 2018). Even in educational settings, professional students are less willing to engage in teamwork or seek advice from disagreeing peers (Yeomans et al., 2020). People hold negative stereotypes regarding ideological opponents, are less willing to hire them even if they are

more qualified, and allocate fewer resources to them in economic games (Fowler & Kam, 2007; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Outside of the experimental context, several factors drive employees' awareness of and engagement with each other's ideological convictions. First, a growing body of literature documents employees' desire and focus on "authenticity" or the experience of bringing one's "real self" to work (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin et al., 2020; Sedikides et al., 2017), with the ability to behave authentically predicting organizational commitment and workplace satisfaction (Martinez et al., 2017; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). Although many characteristics come together to construct someone's "real self," recent research suggests that political identities play a growing role. Scholars have referred to American political parties as a "mega-identities" (Finkel et al., 2020; Mason, 2018)—identities so powerful that they even drive partisans to shift their reported class, religion, or sexual orientation (Egan, 2020; M. Margolis, 2018).

Cues of political identity are difficult to avoid even in casual conversation—Democrats and Republicans watch different television shows, listen to different music, and use different social media platforms (Ridout et al., 2012; Vogels et al., 2021). Political ideology can be inferred from the many personal items displayed or worn at work (e.g., photos, mugs, neckties). This combination of the centrality of political identity as well as individuals' desire for authenticity at work combine to increase employees' awareness of their coworkers' beliefs.

Importantly, many organizational decisions feature choices that have come to be associated with a particular political ideology. Decisions ranging from whether to require vaccination against COVID-19, reimburse reproductive health expenses, reduce a company's carbon footprint, work with law enforcement, or seek out underrepresented job candidates—all communicate a particular political leaning. As a result, any conversations about such decisions will likely reveal people's ideology. Indeed, even when employees discuss shared views on issues, others who disagree may overhear these conversations and experience negative affect (Rosen et al., 2024). Thus, try as they might, employees and employers may find it difficult to avoid politics in the workplace and thus require approaches to navigating any resulting disagreements.

To examine how commonly employees experience political disagreement in the workplace, we surveyed 200 working adults and asked them to recall any political conversations at work in the last 4 weeks.[1] 75% of participants reported discussing politics at work in the last month, and 50% reported experiencing a political disagreement. Focusing on that latter group, 63% reported that the conversation was uncomfortable, 23% tried to avoid working with a disagreeing colleague, and 18% avoided sharing project-relevant information. Importantly, only 16% of respondents said political disagreements were not at all harmful to the effectiveness of their company. These findings are consistent with Mutz and Mondak (2006) who found that conversations with those who have opposing views on social issues are common at work.

While disagreements may be unavoidable, conflict and disruptive behavior need not be. Organizations can thrive despite disagreements if they enable employees to collaborate even when they realize they may disagree on a variety of issues important to them. Fostering such collaborations among disagreeing coworkers requires an understanding of how distrust can be reduced even as the disagreement persists. We propose displaying vulnerability as a novel and promising way to establish trustworthiness.

Signaling Vulnerability Through Self-Revealing Personal Narratives

Why does disagreement so consistently jeopardize trust? Prior research on the phenomenon of "naive realism" (Ross, 2018; Ross & Ward, 1995, 1996; Schwalbe et al., 2020) argues that people habitually place undue faith in the accuracy and objectivity of their own views. They believe their perceptions of complex and controversial issues are reasonable and free from a variety of biasing distortions and errors that plague others' thinking. Having concluded that their views are fundamentally sound, people are prone to be skeptical of opposing views, attributing disagreement to a lack of knowledge, ability, or sincerity on the part of the other side. As a result, they come to distrust the information itself as well as the source thereof (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Vallone et al., 1985).

Because uncertainty abounds in organizations (Simon, 1947) and employees are mutually dependent on each other (Thompson, 1967), believing that others may not be honest and engaging in costly verification efforts harms efficient collaboration (Ma et al., 2020). For example, employees need to rely on and build upon information regarding initiatives, forecasts, resources, or constraints communicated by peers and leadership. To the extent that ideological disagreements undermine such mutual trust, employees may be less likely to make good-faith assumptions about their interactions (Möllering, 2001).

In the present work, we theorize that sharing a SRPN can disrupt the previously documented link between disagreement and distrust. We define SRPNs as stories that divulge an action or event that humbles the protagonist storyteller, for example, by revealing a current or a past struggle that has the potential to cause embarrassment. Thus, SRPNs create vulnerability by exposing the speaker to others' negative judgment (Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Moon, 2000). We theorize that such a willingness to incur a potential interpersonal cost may lead listeners to infer that the speaker values honesty. We therefore hypothesize that people who support an argument by sharing a humbling experience from their own life will be seen as more honest, and the information they share as more accurate, than people who draw on impersonal evidence such as statistical data or stories about others (which do not expose them to the same cost). This theorizing is supported by prior work demonstrating that judging someone to be honest is associated with judging them to be highly principled (Sitkin & Roth, 1993), a characteristic that is an important antecedent to trust (Butler, 1991; Mayer et al., 1995).

Our central argument is bolstered by prior work on the effect of self-disclosure. Acts of self-disclosure signal an interest in building rapport (C. Jiang et al., 2011; Kashian et al., 2017) and increase the perceived authenticity of the speaker (L. Jiang et al., 2022). Although people often avoid self-disclosure (Gromet & Pronin, 2009) to try to manage others' impressions (Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Turnley & Bolino, 2001), these efforts can backfire because those who avoid self-disclosure are judged to be more deceptive (John et al., 2016; Lane & Wegner, 1995) and self-promoting (Brooks et al., 2019) in denying others personal information (G. Margolis, 1974). Indeed, several lines of prior research find that those who are trusting are themselves thought to be more trustworthy (Jeong et al., 2020;

[1] We report the full methods and results of our survey as additional online material (https://osf.io/sb7mj/).

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Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002; Ostrom, 2003; Schweitzer & Kerr, 2000). Our theory suggests vulnerability is one mechanism by which this "iterative" trust-building occurs (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Because sharing an SRPN is a trusting act, counterparts should reciprocate with trust of their own.

We confine ourselves to a facet of trust we label credibility trust—the extent to which a listener finds the message believable and the author sincere. Credibility trust is related to integrity-based trust, defined as "the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719)." However, whereas integrity-based trust focuses on a communicator's adherence to shared ethical principles, credibility trust focuses more specifically on a communicator's intention to be accurate in their representation of information, and consequently the believability of the information itself. Since credibility trust is the judgment of another's honesty, it is this facet of trust that should be enhanced by the vulnerability of an SRPN, since people seem unlikely to lie about personal stories that could cause embarrassment.

Increasing credibility trust may be a particularly fruitful avenue for bridging ideological conflicts. In these identity-relevant, value-based conflicts, individuals may find it difficult to believe that their opponents share their ethical principles (or that they are competent or benevolent—the other widely studied facets of workplace trust, Dirks & de Jong, 2022). However, it may still be possible for counterparts to believe that they are sharing truthful information. Thus, we predict that because SRPNs reveal humbling information and therefore show the speaker's vulnerability, they are likely to lead to increased perceptions of trustworthiness, most specifically perceptions of greater credibility.

The Documented Effects of Narratives

Narratives can shape attitudes and behavior (for a meta-analysis of 74 studies, see Braddock & Dillard, 2016), including by changing perceived norms or outcome expectancies (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). For example, popular TV shows have reduced fertility rates in Latin America as well as in the United States (Kearney & Levine, 2015; La Ferrara et al., 2012). Green and Brock (2000) have theorized that narratives transport the recipient to the world evoked by the narrative, triggering empathy for the characters, in turn limiting counterarguing and guiding the recipient toward the conclusion favored by the storyteller (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Such narrative messages have been successfully used in a variety of public health campaigns (Barbour et al., 2016; Zebregs et al., 2015), including those to encourage women to get mammograms (McQueen et al., 2011) or to help people quit smoking (Igartua et al., 2021).

Narratives have also been examined in the context of the kind of ideology-driven disagreements we study here, such as same-sex marriage or the death penalty (Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Slater et al., 2006). For example, Broockman and Kalla (2016) found that exposing voters to a canvasser who shared information about their transgender experience increased support for transgender rights (see also Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Relatedly, Schneider-Mayerson et al. (2023) found that reading stories about dystopian futures increased concerns about climate change.

Our interest here, however, is not in the persuasive power of stories but rather in the proposed ability of SRPNs to increase credibility trust across ideological divides. Thus, our research contributes to prior work on narratives by employing a very specific kind of narrative, a SRPN, and comparing it to a nearly identical set of messages in which a position is supported with statistical evidence or with stories featuring others' experience. We also test a novel mediation mechanism, via perceptions of the speaker's vulnerability, and a novel facet of trust—credibility trust. We examine whether SRPNs impact not only levels of credibility trust but whether greater trust translates into incentivized collaboration behavior—an important outcome for organizations.

Research Overview

We present the results of five preregistered experiments (combined N = 4,404), manipulating whether communicators present their position on a controversial policy issue as a SRPN, a story about a third party's experience, a reference to statistical data, or a combination of an SRPN and statistical data.

In our first study, we test our basic premise: whether communicators who share their positions using an SRPN are rated higher on credibility trust by those who disagree with them than people who present the same position based exclusively on (accurate) statistical data. We also test the combination of SRPN plus data to see whether data erodes the trust premium from using an SRPN. In Study 2, we vary the extent to which the SRPN contains more versus less humbling information to demonstrate that the more a message conveys vulnerability, the more effective it is in building credibility trust. We also test another narrative condition—a story about a third party—to show the unique importance of a SRPN. In Study 3, we show that the trust-building effect of an SRPN is statistically mediated by perceptions of the author's vulnerability. Study 4 extends our investigation to cases of agreement versus disagreement, demonstrating the special importance SRPNs have for bridging the latter. This study also explores the relationship between credibility trust and previously validated trust measures. Finally, Study 5 shows that adding an SRPN to statistical evidence significantly increases others' willingness to collaborate with the communicator on an incentivized task. This study employs a behavioral measure of trust and builds on findings from Study 1 that show the benefits of adding an SRPN to a data-driven argument.

Open Science Statement

We report all sample sizes, data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the studies. Screen captures of the experimental materials are available as additional online material via the open science framework at https://osf.io/sb7mj/. The complete data, code to reproduce all statistical analyses and figures in the article, and the preregistration reports are also available via the same link. All our studies were preregistered on AsPredicted. We conducted all our analyses using *R* Version 4.3.3 and the latest version of packages available as of March 2, 2024. The research was approved by the Harvard University Area Committee on the Use of Human Subjects (IRB15-1845).

Study 1

Our first study tests whether those who share an SRPN to support or oppose a policy (e.g., how they were hurt by a minimum wage increase) are rated as more trustworthy than those who offer the same set of arguments supported with statistical data (e.g., the

average harm of a minimum wage increase). We also examine the effect of combining an SRPN with data, to test if aversion to quantitative data undermines the trust generated by SRPNs (see Krause & Rucker, 2020 in the context of persuasion).

Method

We recruited 806 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (55% female, $M_{Age} = 38.93$) who passed a simple comprehension check prior to assignment to experimental conditions (see additional online material Table S4 for the characteristics of participants across conditions). This sample size is sufficient to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.13$ with 90% power at the standard significance level of 0.05.[2] Participants began by reporting their attitudes on five statements related to employment in the United States (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* on 7-point Likert scales). Specifically, one statement read: "The federal government should increase the minimum wage to $15 an hour." A participant's response on this item determined whether they would see a message favoring or opposing an increase in the minimum wage, with all participants receiving a message contrary to the position they had endorsed.[3] The remaining four statements were distractors.

We then randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental conditions, which varied the type of explanation included in the message. In the "SRPN" condition, participants received a short paragraph that explained the author's view in the form of a story about their own experience. In the "Data-driven" condition, participants received identical arguments but conveyed in terms of studies and statistical figures. The data text was written to parallel the SRPN as closely as possible. Finally, in the two mixed conditions ("SRPN First" and "Data First"), participants received both messages sequentially, starting with either the narrative or the data-driven text. Table 1 shows the messages across the four conditions expressing opposition to an increase in the minimum wage (see the additional online material for screenshots of all experimental materials).

Participants evaluated the messages and authors by responding to six questions on 5-point Likert scales (*not at all* to *extremely*). We designed four of the questions to measure credibility trust in a way that was maximally face-valid. Specifically, participants reported how trustworthy they thought the author of the message was, how sincere the author was, how likely they believed the information to be true, and how misleading they thought the information was (reverse coded). The remaining two questions tested whether the author relying on an SRPN might pay a reputational penalty by appearing less knowledgeable on the relevant topic. Specifically, participants reported how knowledgeable and how informed the author was about the minimum wage policies. Participants then again rated their agreement with the policy statements from the beginning of the study (to assess attitude change). The survey concluded with standard demographic questions.

Results

In line with our preregistration, we combined the first four questions into a single measure of credibility trust ($\alpha_{Credibility\ Trust} = .86$) and the remaining two questions into a measure of competence on the topic (Spearman–Brown $cor_{Competence} = .88$). We report the correlations among all measures in Table A1.

Figure 1 summarizes our key results. Authors of SRPNs were indeed viewed as higher on credibility trust than those who presented a data-driven argument, $\Delta M = 0.51$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.68], $t(400) = 5.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$ see bars in the figure for means and standard deviations in parentheses. Contrary to our expectations, however, adding data to an SRPN did not undermine trust. Combining data-driven and narrative information led to higher perceived trustworthiness compared to relying on data only, $\Delta M = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.61], $t(403) = 5.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$ if the data-driven information came first, and $\Delta M = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.58], $t(401) = 4.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$ if the order was reversed. There were no differences across the three messages that included the SRPN, $F(2, 601) = 0.80$, $p = .448$, $\hat{\eta}^2_G = .003$, 90% CI [.000, .011]. We made no predictions with regard to the perceived topic competence of the author and found no differences across the four conditions, $F(3, 802) = 1.11$, $p = .346$, $\hat{\eta}^2_G = .004$, 90% CI [.000, .011].[4]

We made no predictions about differences in attitude change between conditions and present the results in Figure A1. Notably, we find that participants across all message types shifted their attitude into the direction of the argument, suggesting that they attended to the arguments.

Discussion

In Study 1, SRPNs led to greater perceptions of credibility trust than explanations relying on statistical information. The gains persisted even when the two types of information were combined, suggesting that the beneficial effects of SRPNs on credibility trust do not stem from an aversion to data. Indeed, as Braddock and Dillard (2016) noted, narratives and statistics need not be mutually exclusive messages.

This combination may be particularly important in organizational contexts where backing arguments with data may be normative, and adding an SRPN may be an overlooked strategy to enhance credibility. We explore this combination further with an incentivized choice task in Study 5. Given that both narrative and data-driven messages shifted participants' attitudes in support of the message, but only narratives increased trust, people may wish to deploy this strategy more often, particularly in workplace contexts where collaboration requires trust between people who may be in ideological disagreement.

Study 2

SRPNs in support of a policy position can take two forms: they can recount the hardship that is experienced as a result of a policy (e.g., the financial struggles resulting from a low-wage job or the struggles of being a working parent) or they can recount how a hardship was relieved after a policy has changed (e.g., the easing of financial struggles after a wage increase, or the decrease in stress

[2] We did not conduct power calculations for this and the following experiments ex ante and instead relied on prior experience to set what we believed to be large sample sizes.

[3] Fourty-nine participants reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (the midpoint of the scale). We randomly assigned them to either a message supporting or opposing a minimum wage increase. All our results are robust to excluding these participants.

[4] All results remain unchanged when we use solely the item that asks about the author's perceived trustworthiness, rather than combining the four items into a measure of credibility trust. Results desegregating the four items are presented in additional online material Table S1.

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Table 1
Data-Driven, SRPN, and SRPN First Messages Opposing an Increase in the Minimum Wage in Study 1

Data-driven message	SRPN
Increasing the minimum wage hurts the people it is supposed to help and drives up prices.	Increasing the minimum wage hurts the people it is supposed to help and drives up prices.
Seattle raised its minimum wage to $15 an hour in 2015. Studies found that many businesses run on small margins, so that many have had to lay off employees. One study reported that the number of low and moderate wage jobs available decreased by 10%. Since the minimum wage has changed, some businesses had to raise prices for their customers. Moreover, one study estimated that it reduced the number of hours employers offered to their workers. Employers also reduced costs by cutting health insurance benefits. Many businesses have shut down because they could not afford the increased costs and prices in some stores have gone up.	I used to work for a small family-owned business in Seattle. The city recently raised its minimum wage to $15 an hour. The place where I worked was barely able to keep the doors open, and after the minimum wage increase they fired some long-time employees, including me. I have been looking for work and really need a job, but most businesses are not hiring because they can not pay the high wages. The jobs that are available are part-time and do not offer benefits, like basic health insurance. At the same time, prices in my neighborhood have gone up, too.
Life for many and for their families has gotten harder as a result.	Life has gotten a lot harder for me and my family.

SRPN first
Increasing the minimum wage hurts the people it is supposed to help and drives up prices.
I used to work for a small family-owned business in Seattle. The city recently raised its minimum wage to $15 an hour. The place where I worked was barely able to keep the doors open, and after the minimum wage increase they fired some long-time employees, including me. I have been looking for work and really need a job, but most businesses are not hiring because they can not pay the high wages. The jobs that are available are part-time and do not offer benefits, like basic health insurance. At the same time, prices in my neighborhood have gone up, too.
Studies found that many businesses run on small margins, so that many have had to lay off employees. One study reported that the number of low and moderate wage jobs available decreased by 10%. Since the minimum wage has changed, some businesses had to raise prices for their customers. Moreover, one study estimated that it reduced the number of hours employers offered to their workers. Employers also reduced costs by cutting health insurance benefits. Many businesses have shut down because they could not afford the increased costs and prices in some stores have gone up.
Life has gotten a lot harder for me and my family.

Note. The data first message and the arguments favoring an increase in the minimum wage are shown along with screenshots of the remaining experimental materials as additional online material. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.

upon finding convenient childcare). The former narrative wherein the speaker is stuck in a state of hardship exposes the author to a greater chance of eliciting others' negative judgments (Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Moon, 2000), and thus increases the speaker's vulnerability relative to a narrative wherein the author's hardship has been overcome.

If credibility trust is, as we hypothesize, driven by the vulnerability implied in SRPNs, then we expect that narratives revealing ongoing hardship evoke greater levels of credibility trust than those recounting attenuated hardship. We test this hypothesis in Study 2. Moreover, we introduce a condition in which the author relates a story, but one about a third party, which we refer to as "other-revealing narratives." To the extent that the increase in credibility trust arises from SRPNs, we do not expect to find other-revealing narratives to increase credibility trust to the same extent. Thus, this condition allows us to rule out an alternative account in which people are more trusting of those who share stories (about anyone) than those who share data.

Method

We recruited 1,203 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk who passed a three-item comprehension check (54% female, M_{Age} = 39.01). Our procedure followed closely that of Study 1: participants again indicated their position regarding increasing the minimum wage to $15 an hour among four additional distractor items. Our study featured a 3 × 2 between-subjects design. We were powered to detect an effect of Cohen's $d = 0.12$ with 90% power and a 0.05 threshold for statistical significance (see additional online materials Table S5 for the characteristics of participants across conditions).

To vary the nature of the message, we showed participants either an SRPN, a data-driven message, or an other-revealing narrative. We further varied the valence of these messages. For half the participants, the message was framed in terms of attenuated hardship: the presence of a high minimum wage reduced financial hardship, or the absence of a high minimum wage kept prices lower and prevented layoffs. In the ongoing hardship frame, the absence (or presence) of a high minimum wage imposed hardship on the author. Thus, we had a total of six messages advocating for an increase in the minimum wage and six messages opposing such an increase.[5]

We then asked participants to evaluate the author's credibility trust and topic competence, using the same items as in Study 1. Finally, we again asked participants about their attitudes toward the five initial employment policies and concluded the survey with basic demographic information.

Results

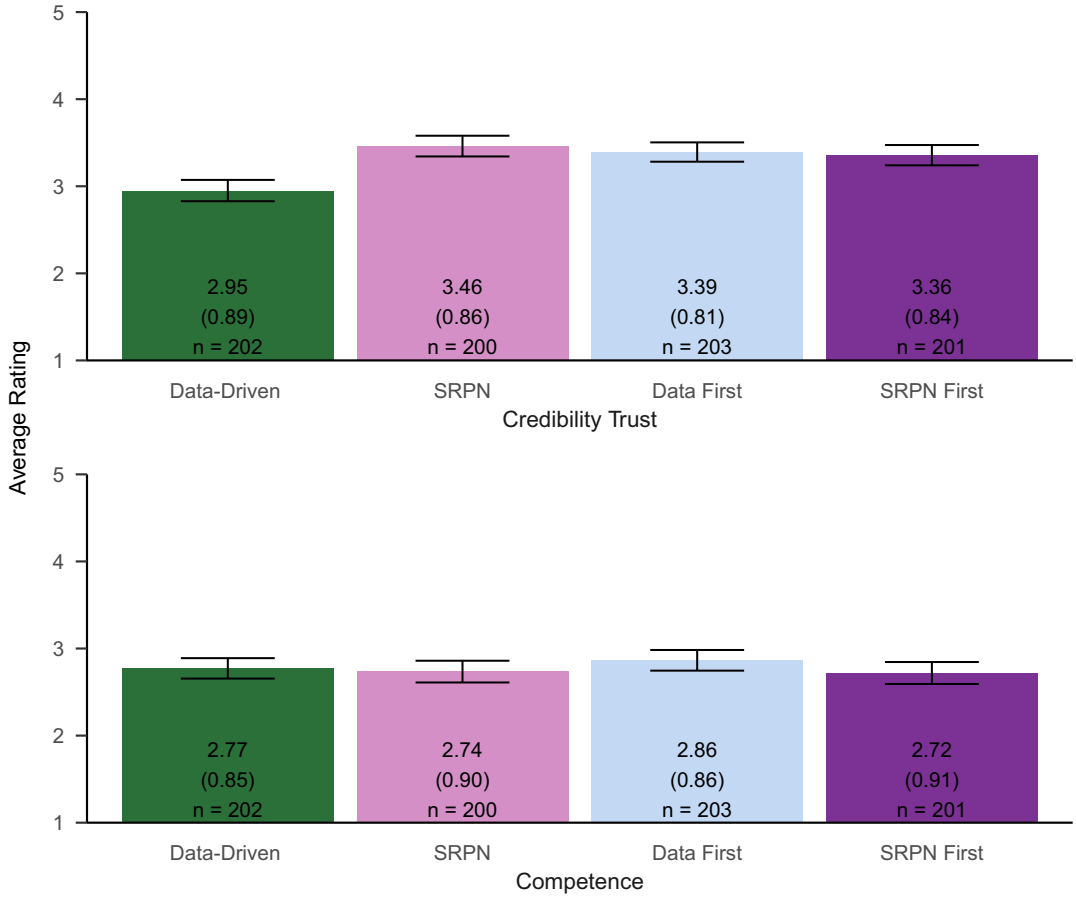
The measures of credibility trust and topic competence again had high internal consistency ($\alpha_{Credibility\ Trust} = .87$, Spearman–Brown $cor_{Competence} = .90$). We report the correlations among all measures in Table A2.

[5] As in Study 1, we always showed participants a message contrary to their initial position.

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Figure 1

Ratings of Credibility Trust and Competence in Study 1



Note. Parentheses show standard deviations and error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

The first three bars in the top panel of Figure 2 show average ratings of credibility trust of the data-driven message, the SRPN, and the other-revealing narrative for the ongoing hardship frame. The next set of three bars shows the corresponding ratings when the message discussed how a hardship had been attenuated. The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows ratings for topic competence across the experimental conditions, for which we did not preregister predictions.

Following our preregistration, we conduct an ordinary least squares regression with fixed effects for message type and hardship framing, as well as a separate analysis including an interaction between the message type and the framing, for each of the two measures (Table 2).[6] Column 1 shows that within message types, the author of the SRPN was viewed as more trustworthy—and within message frames, the ongoing hardship frame was perceived as more trustworthy. The interaction of message frame and message type (Column 2) was not significant, and the difference in R^2 between the baseline model without an interaction term and the one adding an interaction term is not significant, $F(2, 1197) = 0.75$, $p = .474$. In other words, although the ongoing hardship frame boosted the credibility trust of all three messages, the SRPN boosted perceptions of credibility trust across the board, irrespective of frame.

In line with Study 1 results, authors of narratives were not viewed as less competent than those of data-driven messages (Column 3). Interestingly, however, the authors of other-revealing narratives were. The ongoing hardship frame led to higher ratings of competence than the attenuated hardship frame, and the interaction of message frame and message type was again not significant (Column 4). The difference in R^2 between the baseline model without an interaction term and the one adding an interaction term is not significant, $F(2, 1197) = 0.79$, $p = .452$. We report the extent to which participants changed their view on the issue in Figure A2. We found no differences across message types, but participants in the ongoing hardship condition revised their position more so than did those in the attenuated hardship condition.

Discussion

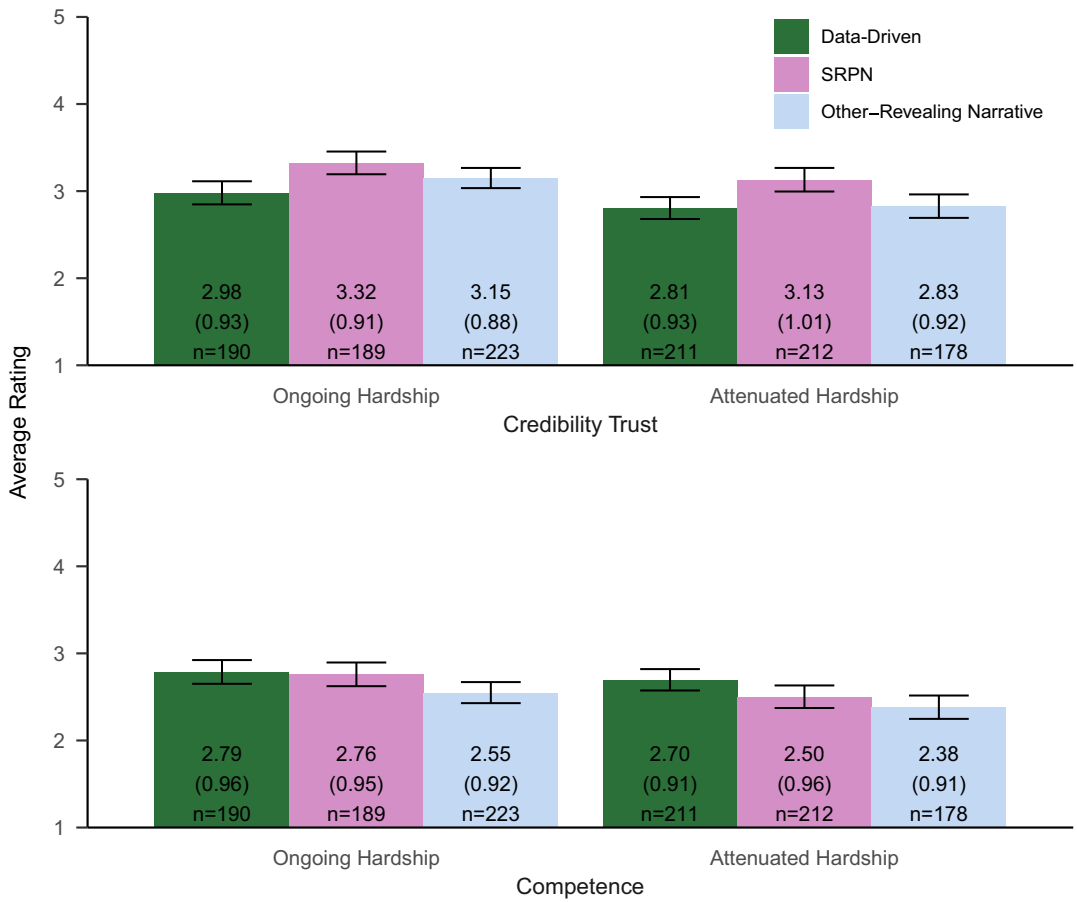
Replicating our finding from Study 1, we again show that authors of SRPNs were rated as more trustworthy than those of data-driven

[6] We preregistered a second set of analyses using ordered logit regression. We present these results, which do not differ qualitatively from the ones reported here, in additional online materials Table S3.

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Figure 2

Evaluations of Credibility Trust and Topic Competence in Study 2 Evaluations of Credibility Trust and Topic Competence



Note. Parentheses show standard deviations and error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

messages. In addition, we found that presenting messages describing an ongoing hardship increased perceptions of trustworthiness as well as competence. For example, talking about the difficulties of finding employment after a minimum wage increase led to higher credibility trust evaluations than reporting the easing of difficulties from an absence of such an increase.

These results support our broader theory about the role of perceived vulnerability in driving the effect of SRPNs on trust. When people support their beliefs with stories of hardships created by public policies, they expose their suffering. This sharing of ongoing hardship makes them appear more vulnerable, and thus boosting their credibility trust. However, we still observe an increase in perceived trustworthiness for SRPNs even when hardship has been attenuated, perhaps because discussing any hardship, even after it has subsided, exposes vulnerability—albeit to a lesser degree than when it persists.

Finally, although we did not make any predictions regarding the effects of our other-revealing narrative treatment on competence, it is interesting that the authors of such messages were judged to be less competent than authors of other message types. This result suggests that the distinction between SRPNs and nonpersonal stories, or "anecdotes," often confounded in previous research, may be important when managing others' impressions.

Study 3

In Study 3, we continue our investigation by testing the extent to which perceptions of vulnerability mediate the effect of sharing a SRPN on credibility trust. Namely, we theorize that SRPNs increase trust perceptions because a communicator's vulnerability suggests that they value truthfulness and for this reason chose to share a story that might expose them to negative judgment. This logic suggests that if a narrative is not seen as vulnerable, it would not signal credibility to a similar extent.

Method

We recruited 600 participants from Prolific and excluded one participant who failed an attention check, leaving us with 599 participants (46% female, M_{Age} = 40.22; see additional online

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Table 2
Ratings of Credibility Trust and Competence in Study 2

Fixed effect	Credibility	Credibility	Competence	Competence
SRPN	0.334*** (0.066)	0.344*** (0.096)	−0.116+ (0.066)	−0.028 (0.096)
Other-revealing narrative	0.100 (0.066)	0.170+ (0.092)	−0.278*** (0.066)	−0.238* (0.092)
Attenuated hardship	−0.230*** (0.054)	−0.175+ (0.093)	−0.171** (0.054)	−0.090 (0.094)
SRPN × Attenuated Hardship		−0.019 (0.132)		−0.167 (0.132)
Other-Revealing Narrative × Attenuated Hardship		−0.148 (0.132)		−0.077 (0.133)
Constant	3.009*** (0.055)	2.980*** (0.068)	2.830*** (0.055)	2.787*** (0.068)
R^2	0.036	0.037	0.021	0.023
F	14.863	9.213	8.694	5.532

Note. $N = 1{,}203$. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. The constant refers to the evaluation of the data-driven message recounting an ongoing hardship. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.
$^{+}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

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materials Table S6 for the characteristics of participants across conditions). We asked participants about their position on increasing the minimum wage to $15, this time leaving out the distractor items. We used a 6-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, omitting the neutral middle option. Participants were then randomly assigned to read either an SRPN or a data-driven message conveying the same argument. As in our previous studies, all participants were assigned to a message expressing the position opposing their own views. Our sample size was sufficient to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.13$ with 90% power at the usual 0.05 threshold for the significance of the main effect.

To examine our hypothesized psychological mechanism, we constructed a measure of vulnerability using four items: "How vulnerable do you think the author felt sharing this message," "How much information that people typically consider private did the author reveal in this message," "How much insight did you gain into sensitive aspects of the author's life," and "How emotionally open did the message make the person seem?" Participants responded to all items on 5-point Likert scales.[7] They then evaluated the author on credibility trust and topic competence, following the procedure of our previous studies.

Participants then completed an attention check about the topic of the message, and a manipulation check asking about the kind of information the author of the message presented. In the data condition 82% reported that the author relied on "studies and data," and in the narrative condition, 97% reported that the message presented "the author's personal experience." We excluded one participant who failed the attention check, but did not exclude any participants based on the manipulation check (in line with our preregistration).

Results

As in our previous studies, we found high internal consistency for measures of credibility trust ($\alpha_{\text{Credibility Trust}} = .87$) and topic competence (Spearman–Brown $\text{cor}_{\text{Competence}} = .91$). Our new measure of vulnerability performed similarly well ($\alpha_{\text{Vulnerability}} = .89$). We report the correlations among all measures in Table A3.

Figure 3 presents our results. Replicating our previous findings, participants rated the author of the SRPN as higher on credibility trust than the author of the data-driven message, $\Delta M = 0.39$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.54], $t(597) = 5.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$, and as equally competent, although we again made no prediction about the latter comparison, $\Delta M = 0.08$, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.23], $t(597) = 1.07$, $p = .287$, $d = 0.09$. As predicted, we also found that the author of the SRPN was viewed as more vulnerable, $\Delta M = 1.29$, 95% CI [1.16, 1.42], $t(597) = 19.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.60$.

Next, we tested our prediction that perceptions of vulnerability statistically mediate the effect of condition assignment on trustworthiness. Figure 4 shows the results of our mediation analysis. We find that narratives are associated with greater vulnerability and that greater vulnerability is associated with greater credibility trust (both ps $< .001$). We estimate the mediation effect using 100,000 bootstrap repetitions and find that vulnerability mediates 162% of the effect of narratives on trustworthiness (95% CI [114.95%, 251.92%]). A share of greater than 100% arises because the coefficient associated with the SRPN condition becomes negative when controlling for vulnerability.

Discussion

In line with our predictions, participants rated the author of a SRPN as more vulnerable and more trustworthy than the author of a data-driven message. Furthermore, this perceived vulnerability fully mediated the effect of relating an SRPN on evoking trust by the other party. These results support our mediation model, suggesting that because authors of SRPNs signal credibility by disclosing private and potentially negative information, the other party evaluates them as more trustworthy. One caveat is that we measured our mediator (vulnerability) and our dependent variable (credibility trust) in the same study and in close temporal proximity. Participants may therefore have inferred our hypothesized mediation. This seems unlikely, however, given that our between-subjects design ensured that they remained unaware of the different experimental treatments. Nevertheless, future research might explore whether our results would be replicated in studies where evaluations of vulnerability were measured at a greater distance from the dependent variable.

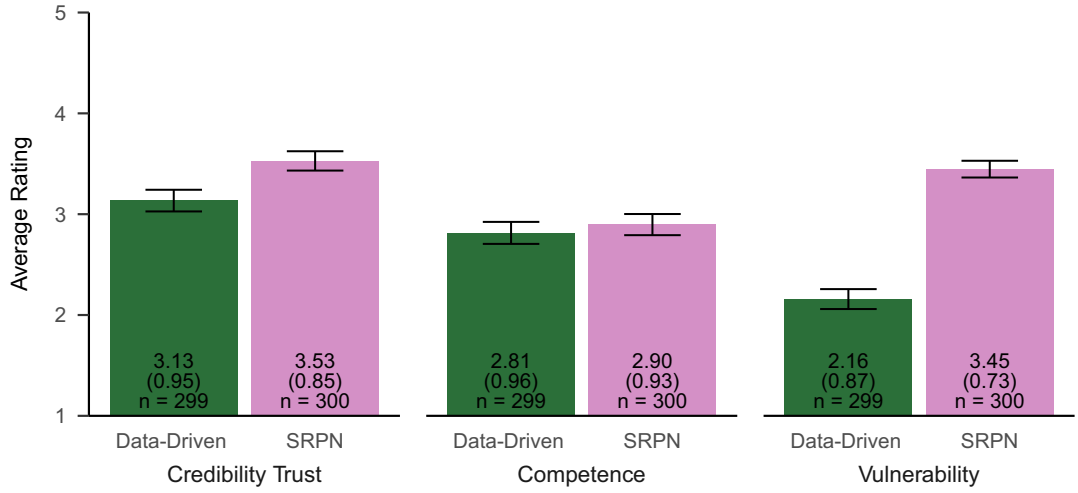
Study 4

In our previous studies, we assigned participants to messages from authors with opposing views, arguing that SRPNs can help

[7] We report a study with a slightly different set of questions measuring vulnerability in the additional online materials as Study S2. The reported main effect, as well as the mediation, replicate.

Figure 3

Evaluations of Credibility Trust, Competence, and Vulnerability in Study 3



Note. Parentheses show standard deviations and error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

bridge the gap created by ideological differences by increasing credibility trust. It is possible, however, that SRPNs generally engender trustworthiness across a variety of contexts and that there is nothing special about disagreement. Alternatively, when parties agree, presenting data that bolsters the recipient's existing view may be more effective than sharing a narrative because individuals may be predisposed to believe (and wish to learn about) data supporting their prior convictions. This is a particularly important consideration for organizational practice where discussants might not know the extent of their disagreement a priori and thus would benefit from a strategy that works well across contexts. In Study 4, we examine this question directly by including conditions in which participants agree with their counterpart. We hypothesized that the credibility trust benefits of sharing an SRPN would be greater in cases of disagreement than agreement.

We further expand our investigation by testing the effects of personal narratives on two additional previously validated scales of trust. We chose established trust scales that are conceptually similar to our credibility trust construct—integrity-based trust (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015) and the Trustworthy Intentions scale (Levine et al., 2018) which measures individuals' willingness to trust a counterpart in different life situations. The items in this scale address a variety of scenarios, and many of them conceptually align with integrity-based trust (e.g., "If this person promised to do me a favor, I believe that they would follow through"). Although credibility trust (believing the other party is truthful) and integrity-based trust (believing the other party is principled) are related, they differ on an important dimension. A person who tells "white lies" may be seen as high on integrity but low on credibility trust because, although they appear to be a principled person, they nevertheless are not conveying truthful information. Thus, we expect these two facets of trust may produce largely parallel results.

Finally, we further generalize our findings by constructing a new set of messages in a different, contentious policy domain—restrictions on abortion care—to show that the previous results are robust to different messages and topics.

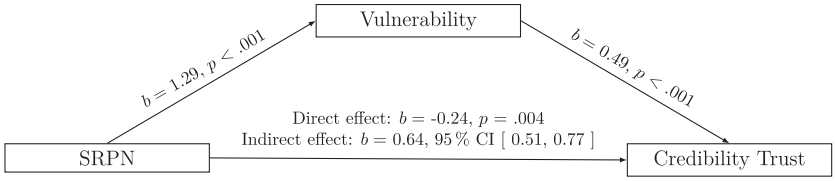
Method

We recruited 1,000 participants via Prolific Academic (45% female, M_{Age} = 42) for an experiment with a 2 × 2 between-participants design (see additional online materials Table S7 for the characteristics of participants across conditions). Our sample size was sufficient to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.12$ with 90% power and the usual 0.05 cutoff for statistical significance.

All participants began the study by reporting whether they supported or opposed policies requiring mandatory waiting periods and mandatory physician consultations prior to obtaining abortion

Figure 4

Mediation Analysis for Study 3 Based on 100,000 Bootstrap Simulations



Note. CI = confidence intervals; SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.

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access. We elicited this attitude using a question with a 6-point Likert scale that did not have a point of indifference. Participants were then randomly assigned to a message type (SRPN or data-driven message), which either explained why the author held the participant's view ("Agreement" conditions) or why they held the opposing view ("Disagreement" conditions).

Participants evaluated the author of the message to which they were assigned on three trust scales: our credibility trust measure (5-point Likert scales), integrity-based trust from Levine and Schweitzer (2015), and Levine et al. (2018) trustworthy intentions (both 7-point Likert scales, see the Supplemental Material for the experimental materials). We presented the three scales in random order, and further randomized the order of each item within each scale. The survey closed with an attention check asking participants about the policy domain of the messages (all participants answered correctly) and standard demographic questions.

Results

We begin by examining the relationships between the three scales. In Table 3, we present the correlations between credibility trust, integrity-based trust, and trustworthy intentions. We report the correlations among all measures in Table A4. We find that the three trust scales are highly correlated, suggesting that they share a common construct (i.e., evaluations of trustworthiness).[8] We report the average ratings of the three measures of trust by experimental condition in Figure 5 and present the corresponding preregistered analyses in Table 4. Recall that our previous measure of credibility trust was collected on 5-point Likert scales, and ratings of integrity-based trust and trustworthy intentions were collected on 7-point scales. For ease of interpretation, we standardize the responses on all three measures around a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.[9]

In line with prior research and our theorizing, across all three scales and both types of messages, participants rated a sender with whom they agreed as being more trustworthy than one with whom they disagreed (all ps $< .001$). Furthermore, when we collapse across agreement and disagreement, participants rated the author of the SRPN as being higher on all three scales than the author of the data-driven message, $\Delta M = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.40], $t(998) = 4.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.28$ for credibility trust, $\Delta M = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.35], $t(998) = 3.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.22$, for integrity trust, and $\Delta M = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.29], $t(998) = 2.68$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.17$ for trustworthy intentions, respectively.

When we examine the magnitude of the effect of an SRPN in cases of agreement versus disagreement, we observe our predicted interaction between disagreement and message type only for the measure of credibility trust ($p = .03$). By contrast, the measures of integrity-based trust and trustworthy intentions captured a benefit of SRPNs that was equal for both agreeing and disagreeing counterparts (see Columns 4–6 of Table 4). The model with the interaction term significantly improves fit for credibility trust $F(1, 996) = 4.69$, $p = .031$ but not for integrity trust and intention trust, $F(1, 996) = 0.25$, $p = .617$ and $F(1, 996) = 0.03$, $p = .874$, respectively.

To better understand this pattern of results, we separately examined the items in the credibility trust scale focused on the message content versus the character of the message author (shown in Figure 6 and correlations in Table 3). This analysis reveals that the observed interaction is largely driven by participants' inferences about the content of the message, rather than the evaluations of the trustworthiness of the author (Columns 7 and 8 of Table 4). The model with the interaction term significantly improves fit for the message content $F(1, 996) = 11.89$, $p < .001$ but not for the credibility of the author $F(1, 996) = 0.39$, $p = .533$.

Specifically, it appears that people are highly skeptical of data intended to bolster an opposing argument. This skepticism of data-based messages in cases of disagreement hurts overall evaluations of credibility. We report the unstandardized regression from Table 4 for each item of our Credibility Trust scale separately in additional online material Table S2. The main effects of SRPN and agreement are significant and positive for all four items (with misleading reverse coded), and the interaction of SRPN and agreement is significant only for the two items relating to the information content (the information is true and the information is misleading).

Discussion

Study 4 replicated our main finding, namely that authors of SRPNs were viewed as more trustworthy, in a new domain (abortion restrictions) and across agreeing and disagreeing messages. We also documented this result using two previously validated trust scales. As we expected, participants also viewed someone who agrees with them as more trustworthy than someone who disagrees. Importantly, our measure of credibility trust appears to pick up a distinction between how individuals experience SRPNs from agreeing versus disagreeing others that was not captured by the other two scales. Notice as well that the items measuring message content correlated slightly less well with prior trust measures, suggesting that the scales from prior work measure perceptions of author traits more than information credibility. Future research should investigate the robustness of this finding and the manner in which individuals evaluate the credibility of information as distinct from the credibility of the individuals who present it.

Study 5

Our studies so far have relied on ratings and evaluations. Study 5 turns to examining the behavioral implications of our findings in a work context. To do so, we reminded participants that as workers on Prolific, they were employees in an online labor market, designed to match employers and workers for short tasks. As part of this study, they had the chance to choose another worker with whom they would be paired. Participants then received messages from two senders who held views opposing those reported by the participant. We then randomly assigned them to select one of the two senders for an incentivized task that relied on the sender's analytical ability or

[8] To examine if the different items measuring trust indeed load onto three separate factors, we conduct an exploratory factor analysis. We find that model fit significantly improves for a model with three factors relative to one or two factors. Moreover, the items load strongest onto factors corresponding to their respective scales. We show a diagram of the factor analysis in additional online materials Figure S5 and report measures of model fit in the corresponding figure notes.

[9] All results hold when we conduct the analyses on the unstandardized values.

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Table 3
Correlations of Trust Measures in Study 4

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Credibility trust	3.64	1.06	—				
2. Credibility (author)	3.53	1.07	.95***	—			
3. Credibility (message)	3.75	1.14	.96***	.83***	—		
4. Integrity	4.97	1.71	.84***	.83***	.78***	—	
5. Intention	4.70	1.42	.79***	.79***	.72***	.84***	—

Note. $N = 1{,}000$. Credibility trust is the average measure of four trust items (measured on 5-point Likert scales), which we decompose into the average of two relating to the author of the message and two relating to the message content. Integrity trust is the average of three items. Intention trust is the average of eight items, all collected on 7-point Likert scales.
*** $p < .001$.

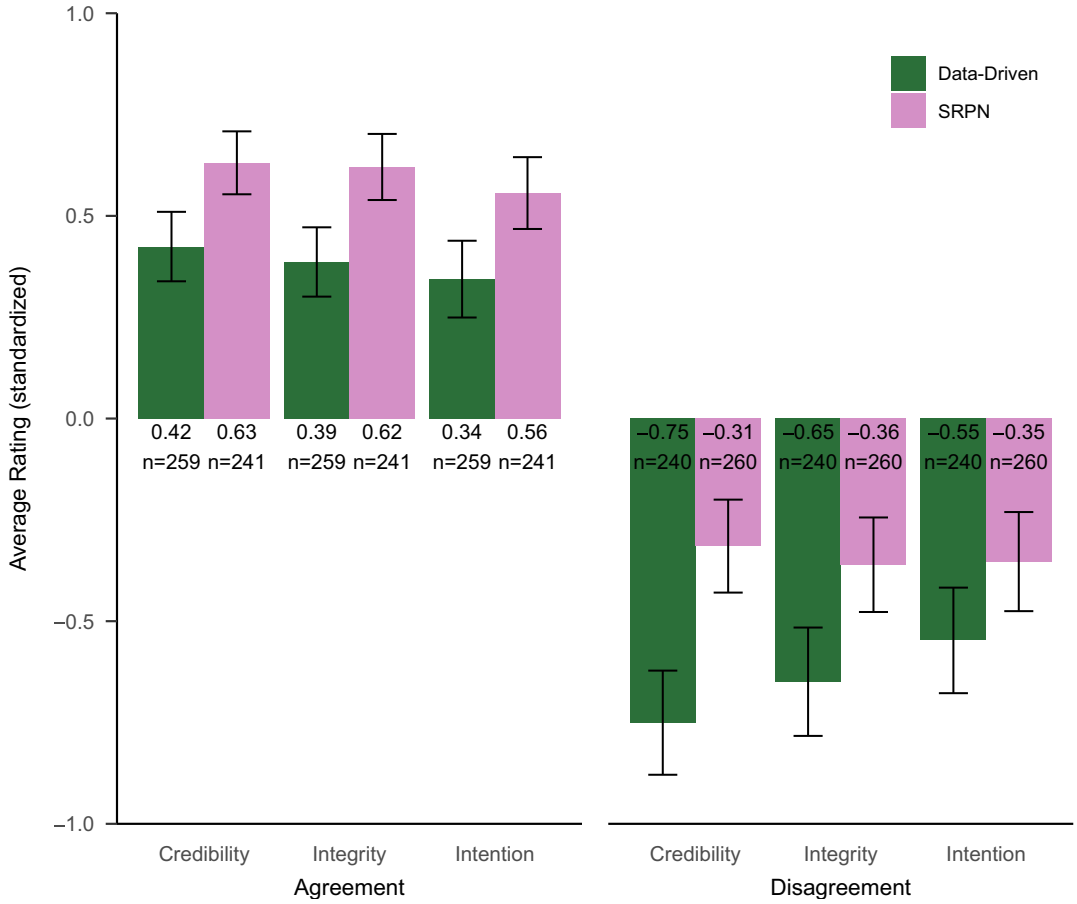
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the sender's honest disclosure of their performance on the same analytical task.

Method

We recruited 800 participants via Prolific Academic, four of whom failed an attention check and were excluded in line with our preregistration. We thus present results from 796 participants (51% female, $M_{Age} = 40.00$; see additional online materials Table S8 for the characteristics of participants across conditions). As in Study 4, participants first reported their attitude toward a policy restricting access to abortion on a 6-point Likert scale. All participants then read two messages from two different senders who did not share their position. One message explained the opposing position citing relevant statistics, whereas the other embedded data in an SRPN. This approach allowed us to ensure that both messages contained the

Figure 5
Average Standardized Ratings of Three Different Trust Measures in Study 4



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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Table 4
Ratings of Trust Measures in Study 4

Fixed effect	Credibility	Integrity	Intention	Credibility	Integrity	Intention	Credibility (author)	Credibility (message)
SRPN	0.321*** (0.053)	0.262*** (0.054)	0.203*** (0.056)	0.436*** (0.075)	0.289*** (0.077)	0.194* (0.080)	0.303*** (0.078)	0.524*** (0.074)
Agreement	1.060*** (0.053)	1.008*** (0.054)	0.900*** (0.056)	1.175*** (0.075)	1.036*** (0.077)	0.891*** (0.080)	0.977*** (0.078)	1.260*** (0.074)
SRPN × Agreement				−0.229* (0.106)	−0.054 (0.109)	0.018 (0.113)	−0.069 (0.111)	−0.360*** (0.104)
Constant	−0.691*** (0.046)	−0.635*** (0.048)	−0.552*** (0.049)	−0.750*** (0.054)	−0.649*** (0.055)	−0.547*** (0.057)	−0.623*** (0.057)	−0.806*** (0.053)
R^2	0.301	0.267	0.210	0.304	0.267	0.210	0.236	0.322
F	214.169	181.223	132.296	144.870	120.807	88.119	102.369	157.884

Note. $N = 1{,}000$. Credibility trust is the average measure of four trust items, which we decompose into the average of two relating to the author of the message and two relating to the message content. Integrity trust is the average of three items and intention trust is the average of eight items. The constant refers to evaluations for the data-driven message in which the author disagrees with the evaluator. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

same amount of data, making the authors appear similarly quantitatively sophisticated and able to carry out an analytical task. Our sample size was sufficiently large to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.09$ with 90% power and the usual 0.05 threshold for statistical significance.

To ensure that the information in the two messages read by any given participant was not repetitive, we constructed a total of eight messages, reflecting the two positions (in favor or opposed to abortion restrictions), emphasizing two lines of reasoning for both views, and either supported only with data, or with the same data embedded in an SRPN. Thus, any one participant would see two messages that did not overlap in content, but across participants, each data-only message had a paired message using the same statistics embedded in the context of a SRPN. To ensure our results were not due to order effects, we further randomized whether participants observed the "data-only" or the "data-in-SRPN" message first. Following our preregistration, we collapsed all our analyses across positions, message sets, and orderings, focusing only on the difference between the two message types.

After reading the first message, participants evaluated the author on credibility trust as well as on three questions related to competence: "The sender seems very capable of performing challenging tasks," "The sender seems very knowledgeable," and "I feel confident in the sender's skills," adapted from Mayer and Davis (1999). These items were collected on 5-point Likert scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. They then read the second message and evaluated it and its author using the same items.

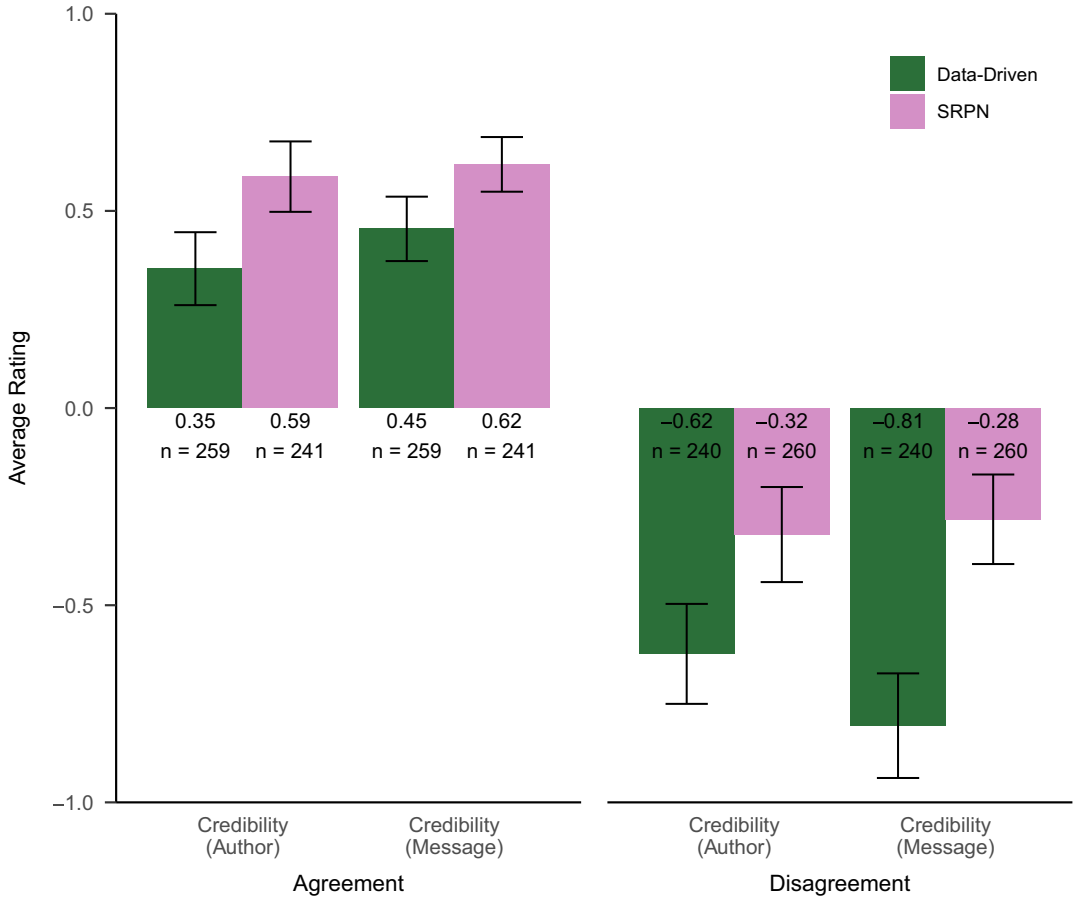
Next, participants were introduced to two tasks (in random order). One was described as the "Smarts Game," in which the message senders could answer a difficult rebus puzzle (see the additional online material for screenshots of the experimental materials). Participants learned that they would receive a bonus if their chosen partner solved the puzzle correctly. In the "Honesty Game," participants saw the same puzzle description, but instead were told that they would receive a bonus if their chosen partner told them the truth about whether or not they solved the puzzle correctly. We truthfully informed participants that, in a large study, the majority of participants failed to solve this puzzle (Golman et al., 2022).

We chose these tasks because they map onto choices managers often have to make in organizations. Namely, the first task required the participants to choose the person who seemed most likely to complete a difficult analytical task. The second game required participants to choose the person who was most likely to truthfully disclose potentially embarrassing information related to their performance on the analytical task. Both tasks benefited from analytical skills: If a person was able to solve the puzzle, they would not be tempted to lie about their performance. However, whereas the smarts game relies only on analytical ability, the honesty game mimics many organizational contexts in that it requires both analytical ability and credibility trust, sharing failures rather than attempting to cover them up. After learning about each game, participants saw both messages one more time and reported which of the two senders they preferred to be partnered with for each using a 6-point Likert scale (anchored on strongly preferring one partner to strongly preferring the other).

Next, we randomly assigned participants to one of the two tasks and presented them with an incentivized binary choice. Specifically, in the "Smarts Game," they would earn a $1 bonus if the sender they selected answered the puzzle correctly. In the "Honesty Game," they

Figure 6

Average Ratings of the Components of Credibility Trust in Study 4



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

would earn a $1 bonus if the sender they selected reported truthfully whether or not they had answered it correctly. The survey then concluded with an attention check asking participants about the topic of the messages they evaluated and basic demographic questions.

To ensure that the study was conducted in an incentive-compatible manner and without deception, we also collected a small number of participants for the role of "senders." They attempted to solve the puzzle, decided whether to report their performance accurately or to misreport, and selected one of the prewritten messages to be sent to disagreeing participants in our focal study. The participants in the focal study were then matched with a sender of the message they had chosen on the incentivized task and received a bonus according to that sender's performance on the puzzle or their honesty, depending on the condition. Notably, we made no predictions about the behavior of the senders and merely orchestrated this part of the procedure so that all the information we shared with the main participants was true.

Results

We begin by looking at the ratings of credibility trust and competence (correlations for all measures are shown in Tables A5 and A6). Since each participant evaluated both senders, and following our preregistration, we report within-subjects t tests. In line with results from Study 1, we find that the sender of the data-in-SRPN message was rated higher on credibility trust than the sender of the data-only message, $M_D = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.49], $t(795) = 14.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$. Notably, we also observed that the author of the data-in-SRPN message was viewed as more competent, $M_D = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.31], $t(795) = 8.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.29$; we made no prediction about this. We report the correlations of ratings for the data-only author and the data-in-SRPN author in Tables A5 and A6, respectively.

Next, we examined which sender the participants preferred to collaborate with on each of the two tasks. Recall that participants used a 1–6 scale to report whether they would prefer to work with one sender or the other. We recoded the values such that a higher number reflects a preference for the sender of the data-in-SRPN message. Participants favored the sender who included an SRPN on both tasks, reporting a significantly higher desire to collaborate with them than the midpoint of 3.5, $M = 4.16$, 95% CI [4.05, 4.27], $t(795) = 11.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.42$ in the honesty game, and $M = 3.79$, 95% CI [3.67, 3.90], $t(795) = 4.88$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.17$ in the smarts game. Most importantly, and as predicted, we find that participants had a stronger

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preference toward the sender of the data-in-SRPN message when that task required honesty rather than only analytical ability, M_D = 0.37, 95% CI [0.29, 0.46], $t(795) = 8.57$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$, suggesting that SRPNs are particularly powerful for enabling the willingness to collaborate across divides on tasks that require trust.

Finally, we can look at our incentivized measure. Recall that participants made a binary choice for one of the two senders, and they could earn a bonus based on whether that participant answered the puzzle correctly (the "Smarts Game") or whether they honestly reported their performance (the "Honesty Game"). We hypothesized that participants were more likely to choose the sender of the data-in-narrative message as their partner in the task relying on honesty. Indeed, we find that participants chose the sender who shared an SRPN 68% of the time in the honesty game and 52% of the time in the smarts game, $\Delta M = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.24], $t(794) = 4.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$.[10] Notably, participants chose the sender who included an SRPN more than half the time in the honesty Game, M = 0.68, 95% CI [0.64, 0.73], $t(397) = 7.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$, but were no more likely to choose one or the other sender for the task relying on analytical ability only, $M = 0.52$, 95% CI [0.47, 0.56], $t(397) = 0.60$, $p = .548$, $d = 0.03$.[11]

Discussion

Study 5 offered participants a choice of partners for an incentivized task, where their compensation depended on either their partner's analytical performance or their partner's truthfulness. In line with our predictions, we found that participants choosing between a sender of a data-only message and a sender of a message that embedded the data in a SRPN favored the latter for work that required truthfulness. Results here echo those of Study 1, demonstrating the effectiveness of such combined messages. Our results suggest that couching statistics in an SRPN may be an effective approach for building collaboration across ideological divides.

General Discussion

Across five high-powered, preregistered experiments, we find evidence that disagreeing parties can promote trust using a simple communication strategy: conveying their position with a SRPN. Our studies suggest that sharing an SRPN portrays an individual as more vulnerable than someone relying on data-driven arguments. This basic finding held across multiple topics, for contexts where participants agreed or disagreed with each other, and using a variety of trust measures. Moreover, it emerged despite the fact that we carefully crafted the messages to present identical arguments and relied on accurate data from reputable sources. Our findings are also robust to various degrees of disagreement between the author of the message and its recipient (see additional online material, Figures S6–S10). Importantly, these perceptions of trustworthiness translated into real preferences to collaborate on an incentivized work task.

Implications for Theory and Research on Workplace Trust

Prior work has documented over 40 empirical antecedents of trust in organizations (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Perhaps surprisingly, vulnerability has not been one of them. Yet, the advice to display vulnerability may be relatively easy to implement in the context of a disagreement, particularly if the personal experience is why the speaker is invested in the issue in the first place. Moreover, whereas prior work linked trust in leaders to believing their message (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), our findings suggest that benevolence or integrity trust do not fully capture whether people believe the information that is offered to them. Given the organizational importance of accepting and relying on information that is conveyed by others, this new facet of trust, which we term credibility trust, may promote efficient collaboration within organizations even when disagreements cannot be resolved.

Our findings may be particularly important for workplace interactions where employees often cannot choose their coworkers and may depend on those with known ideological differences. While establishing shared ethical values (integrity trust), mutual care (benevolence trust), or one's competence may be difficult and time-consuming, and hence particularly challenging in fleeting collaborations, credibility trust requires little effort and may often suffice. As we show in Study 5, when a task requires trust, participants prefer to work with those who share an SRPN when given the choice.

Our work is situated within the growing stream of research on how workplace trust is not always bestowed rationally but can be based on seemingly irrelevant factors (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). For example, people trust those with more resources (van der Werff et al., 2019) and higher social status (Lount & Pettit, 2012), while being less trusting of those who evoke negative emotions (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). Similarly, one might make the argument that placing greater trust in someone who shares an SRPN may be a comparable violation of rationality since personal stories are easy to invent and difficult to verify. Combined, this research raises important questions regarding whether on balance, individuals attend to incorrect signals in judging whom to trust, or whether our models of what is "rational" in the domain of trust should be updated to include additional considerations. For example, future research might examine whether people who spontaneously choose to share or withhold an SRPN when given the chance are in fact more or less trustworthy.

A rich research tradition examines the topic of trust repair, particularly in the leadership context (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017). In our investigation, we consider repairing a relationship which suffers from distrust as a result of disagreement rather than misbehavior. To the extent that sharing an SRPN enhances credibility trust in cases of disagreement, it is interesting to extend the same logic to trust deficits resulting from ethical violations. For example, would a narrative revealing prior struggles serve to repair trust in a leader who has appropriated company funds or falsified financial records? As in our data, a willingness to make oneself vulnerable might make observers more likely to believe that the wrongdoer has turned over a new leaf. Indeed, the literature on apologies offers some support to this theorizing (Hechler et al., 2022).

[10] We preregistered a t test corresponding to a linear probability model (Gomila, 2021). The results are robust to using a chi-squared test, $\chi^2(1, n = 796) = 22.79$, $p < .001$.

[11] We report an additional study using different messages and tasks as Study S3 in the additional online materials. We compare an SRPN-only treatment with a data-only treatment across four tasks, with two relying on analytical ability and two relying on trustworthiness (but not ability). We replicate our main effect, with authors of SRPNs chosen more often for the trust tasks than for the competence tasks.

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Although a rich literature has demonstrated the benefits of stories over statistics for changing beliefs and behavior in civic domains (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020; but see Freling et al., 2020 for limitations), our research demonstrates the unique benefit of SRPNs for enhancing trustworthiness and willingness to collaborate even in the absence of persuasion. The ability to have thoughtful conversations and engage in collaboration even when disagreement remains is understudied and can be particularly important for workplace dynamics. Within organizations, employees are not necessarily trying to change each other's beliefs on social issues, but rather need to have sufficient trust in a colleague's honesty to share and seek workplace information, collaborate on a team, or partner on a joint project. As we report in Study S1, ideological disagreements undermine such collaborative behavior at work. Future research might test the unique effectiveness of credibility trust for supporting other organizational tasks, particularly for increasing employees' willingness to accept bad news (such as company downturns or a negative performance appraisal). Indeed, believing others to be truthful—or even speaking their truth—may prove to be more beneficial to collaboration in the increasingly diverse workplaces of the future than general likability or actual agreement.

Implications for Practice

Despite the large body of work documenting the psychological biases underpinning mistrust and conflict, few studies propose successful interventions that can enable ideological opponents to collaborate effectively. Crucially, many such interventions may be difficult to implement in the field. Some rely on coaching participants through effortful activities such as conscious reframing of emotions or perspectives. Others require a third party to provide outside information, or structure the interaction to reduce or eliminate behaviors and cognitions that lead to further conflict escalation. Organizations may not wish to engage in such efforts directly, not least because they do not want to appear partisan or to create workplace conflict. Yet, our work suggests that they may need to be concerned about political disagreements all the same.

In contrast, our intervention is one that conflict participants can execute with no outside facilitation and requires little effort. Supporting one's point of view by revealing evidence from one's life experience can become part of any individual's toolkit for increasing trust and collaboration potential with those who hold opposing views.

Furthermore, building credibility trust may be a key objective of those seeking to mobilize support among followers. Indeed, much of leadership communication may not be intended to persuade, or create likability, but to build a foundation of credibility. For business leaders, enjoying high levels of credibility trust can be a foundational goal, particularly in turbulent environments where bad news must be acted on. Leaders who are generally more trustworthy are seen as more ethical stewards of their organization's future (Caldwell et al., 2010) and such trustworthiness has been linked to organizational ambidexterity (Purvee & Enkhtuvshin, 2015). Finally, followers who trust their leaders report more job satisfaction (Wang & Satow, 1994). Our results suggest that credibility trust translates into a greater willingness to collaborate with peers who hold opposing views, and this may similarly hold for working under leaders with different views.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our theory for building workplace trust centered on the vulnerability one demonstrates when choosing an SRPN. We reasoned this vulnerability would increase speaker and message credibility because the willingness to expose oneself to negative judgment signals a commitment to honesty. Yet, untested is whether an SRPN also evokes sympathy or other positively valenced emotions in the listener, which might enhance a speaker's perceived trustworthiness (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). In this vein of testing the emotional valence of various communication choices and their downstream consequences, future research might also test whether data arguments evoke negative emotions and activate a desire to authenticate or counterargue. Research should also examine whether the greater credibility trust evoked through the use of an SRPN will increase listeners' willingness to engage in future dialogue, creating the possibility of downstream persuasion (McGinnies & Ward, 1980).

Our context did not study hierarchical social relations and future work might consider extensions to challenges leaders often face. Although it seems likely that credibility trust would be similarly enhanced when leaders share an SRPN, leaders may face costs that may make this strategy less attractive. Future research should examine, for example, whether vulnerability on the part of a leader comes with reductions in competence evaluations. Although our work did not find this to be the case, the results may be different in hierarchical relationships.

Other limitations of our research have to do with the design choices we made. We constructed messages for or against various political issues so as to increase the internal validity of our comparisons across communication choices. Future research might consider real conversations occurring in the workplace. To the extent that we attempted to write strong, data-driven messages based on accurate and reliable data, our observed effect might be a conservative estimate: people may naturally be more skilled at recounting their personal experience than presenting objective data. However, participants in our experiments did not have the opportunity to follow-up on the information, and it is possible that they could ask probing questions about the data that would assuage their concerns about the truthfulness thereof.

Our experimental context, moreover, involved one-time evaluations of strangers. While some organizational settings lead to one-off (or other short-lived) interactions, many others involve long-term relationships. It is possible that SRPNs would have a more limited impact then, as colleagues would have other means of inferring credibility trust. For example, they may know if someone generally shares reliable information, or if they share gossip that often turns out to be incorrect. However, it is also possible that the trust generated by SRPNs forms the basis for building a deeper and more meaningful connection over time. They may lead the listener to reciprocate with a SRPNs of their own, and an initial decision to be trusting may reveal that a counterpart is trustworthy. Moreover, we have focused on participants from the United States and topics that are particularly controversial there. Future research could examine our findings in more ecologically valid organizational contexts and across a greater variety of samples and populations.

Future work might also test the limitations of our findings. For example, what happens if the personal story is later revealed to be an embellishment of the truth? Is there a limit to just how personal the narratives should be? Indeed, there are limits to the extent that self-revealing narratives induce likability—for example, when the intimacy is deemed inappropriate to the setting (Collins & Miller,

1994). We suspect our findings will meet with similar boundary conditions if people "over-share" their hardships in the workplace. We also suspect an important boundary condition requires that SRPNs have some amount of humility implied by the story. If the personal story is perceived as "humble-bragging" (Sezer et al., 2018), we doubt it would have the same effect.

Finally, our work has focused on the recipients of SRPNs, leading us to conclude that individuals should rely on SRPNs more broadly to establish credibility trust. Future research should examine the supply of SRPNs. Are people who naturally rely on personal stories indeed more trustworthy than those who argue based on data? That is, were the participants in our studies correct when inferring higher credibility trust? Or do some people strategically rely on SRPNs either because they do not have data to argue with or because they are exploiting the trust they anticipate this approach will generate?

Conclusion

Our society is grappling with the presence of unprecedented ideological conflict. Gradually, the interpersonal mistrust inherent in these conflicts has permeated the workplace, threatening frictions within organizations. Our findings suggest one way to bridge these divides at work and beyond. When disagreements threaten our ability to collaborate with one another, encouraging people to share how their personal experiences have shaped their beliefs may be a simple yet effective tool in promoting trust and collaboration.

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(*Appendix follows*)

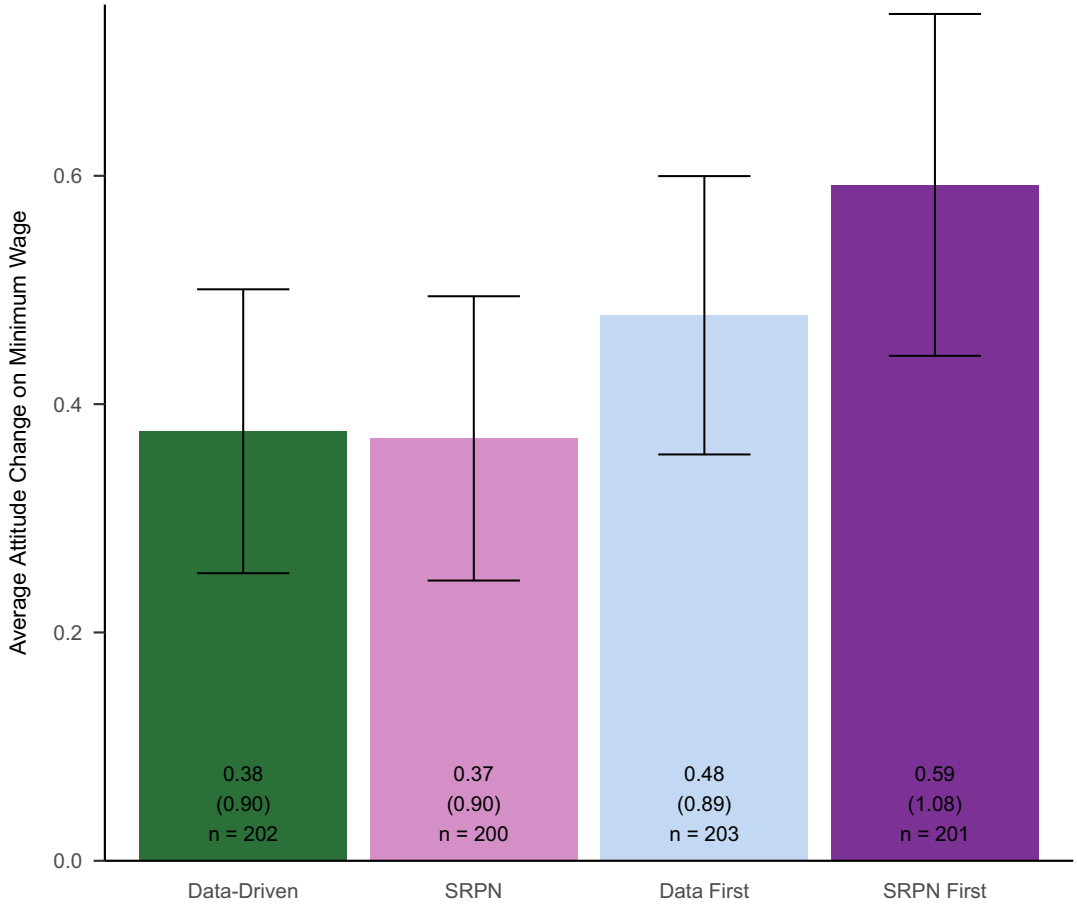
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Appendix

Additional Analyses

Figure A1

Changes in Attitude on a Minimum Wage Increase in Study 1



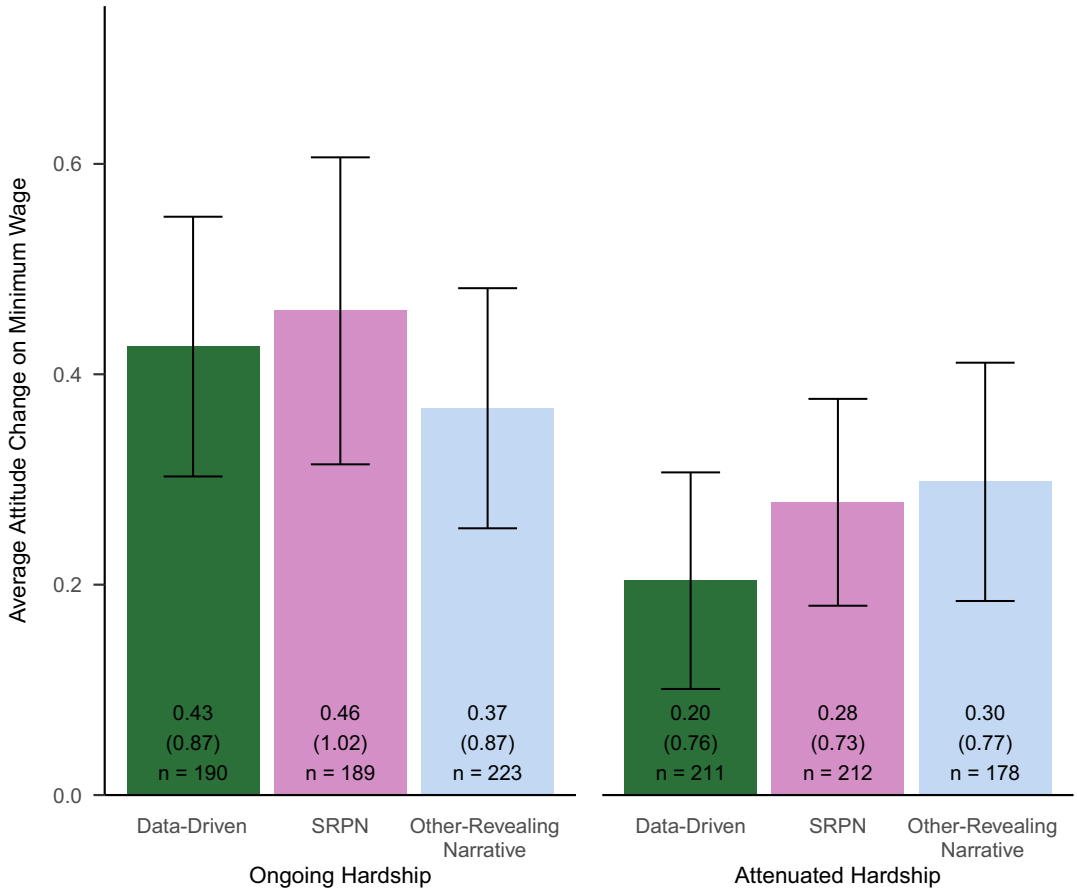
Note. Parentheses show standard deviations and error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

(*Appendix continues*)

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Figure A2

Changes in Attitude on a Minimum Wage Increase in Study 2



Note. Parentheses show standard deviations and error bars show 95% confidence intervals. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table A1

Pearson Correlations for the Continuous Variables in Study 1

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Trustworthy	2.95	0.94	—							
2. Sincere	3.51	0.99	.72***	—						
3. Infotrue	3.03	1.08	.74***	.63***	—					
4. Misleading	3.67	1.12	.56***	.50***	.59***	—				
5. Knowledgeable	2.77	0.92	.60***	.49***	.63***	.52***	—			
6. Informed	2.78	0.95	.59***	.47***	.60***	.51***	.79***	—		
7. Credibility trust	3.29	0.87	.88***	.83***	.87***	.79***	.66***	.64***	—	
8. Competence	2.77	0.88	.63***	.51***	.65***	.54***	.94***	.95***	.69***	—

Note. $N = 806$. "Misleading" is reverse coded. Credibility trust is the average score of trustworthy, sincere, infotrue, and misleading (reverse coded) and competence is the average score of knowledgeable and informed.

*** $p < .001$.

(*Appendix continues*)

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Table A2

Pearson Correlations for the Continuous Variables in Study 2

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Trustworthy	2.72	1.00	—							
2. Sincere	3.33	1.09	.68***	—						
3. Infotrue	2.74	1.11	.75***	.64***	—					
4. Misleading	3.37	1.25	.61***	.52***	.64***	—				
5. Knowledgeable	2.62	0.98	.65***	.48***	.64***	.51***	—			
6. Informed	2.61	1.00	.63***	.44***	.60***	.50***	.83***	—		
7. Credibility trust	3.04	0.95	.88***	.82***	.88***	.83***	.67***	.63***	—	
8. Competence	2.61	0.95	.67***	.48***	.65***	.53***	.95***	.96***	.68***	—

Note. $N = 1{,}203$. "Misleading" is reverse coded. Credibility trust is the average score of trustworthy, sincere, infotrue, and misleading (reverse coded) and competence is the average score of knowledgeable and informed.
*** $p < .001$.

Table A3

Pearson Correlations for the Continuous Variables in Study 3

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Vulnerable	2.96	1.26	—												
2. Private	2.36	1.15	.61***	—											
3. Sensitive	2.80	1.24	.66***	.67***	—										
4. Open	3.10	1.13	.70***	.62***	.72***	—									
5. Trustworthy	3.06	0.99	.43***	.35***	.50***	.49***	—								
6. Sincere	3.44	1.05	.39***	.29***	.40***	.46***	.76***	—							
7. Infotrue	3.09	1.10	.34***	.29***	.41***	.37***	.74***	.68***	—						
8. Misleading	3.74	1.19	.23***	.15***	.27***	.25***	.53***	.49***	.60***	—					
9. Knowledgeable	2.84	0.96	.32***	.28***	.37***	.35***	.64***	.57***	.63***	.47***	—				
10. Informed	2.87	1.01	.28***	.23***	.36***	.33***	.61***	.54***	.62***	.50***	.84***	—			
11. Credibility trust	3.33	0.92	.40***	.31***	.46***	.46***	.88***	.85***	.88***	.78***	.68***	.67***	—		
12. Competence	2.86	0.94	.31***	.26***	.38***	.35***	.65***	.58***	.66***	.51***	.96***	.96***	.70***	—	
13. Vulnerability	2.80	1.03	.86***	.83***	.89***	.88***	.51***	.45***	.41***	.26***	.38***	.35***	.47***	.38***	—

Note. $N = 599$. "Misleading" is reverse coded. Credibility trust is the average score of trustworthy, sincere, infotrue, and misleading (reverse coded), competence is the average score of knowledgeable and informed, and vulnerability is the average score of vulnerable, private, sensitive, and open.
*** $p < .001$.

(*Appendix continues*)

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Table A4

Pearson Correlations for the Continuous Variables in Study 4

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Trustworthy	3.24	1.16	—																	
2. Sincere	3.82	1.12	.77***	—																
3. Infotrue	3.47	1.19	.79***	.74***	—															
4. Misleading	4.03	1.29	.68***	.65***	.69***	—														
5. Integrity_1	5.01	1.75	.79***	.75***	.73***	.72***	—													
6. Integrity_2	4.83	1.82	.78***	.72***	.71***	.68***	.86***	—												
7. Integrity_3	5.08	1.77	.79***	.76***	.75***	.72***	.92***	.87***	—											
8. Intention_1	5.03	1.52	.71***	.68***	.63***	.59***	.74***	.74***	.73***	—										
9. Intention_2	4.81	1.59	.65***	.64***	.58***	.56***	.71***	.69***	.71***	.80***	—									
10. Intention_3	3.45	1.86	.50***	.42***	.45***	.39***	.54***	.54***	.52***	.57***	.57***	—								
11. Intention_4	5.02	1.51	.67***	.66***	.59***	.59***	.71***	.70***	.70***	.81***	.78***	.54***	—							
12. Intention_5	4.58	1.71	.68***	.62***	.62***	.59***	.70***	.69***	.68***	.74***	.72***	.57***	.70***	—						
13. Intention_6	5.12	1.48	.66***	.66***	.59***	.55***	.71***	.70***	.71***	.80***	.76***	.55***	.78***	.68***	—					
14. Intention_7	4.58	1.86	.73***	.64***	.66***	.66***	.76***	.75***	.76***	.75***	.73***	.57***	.73***	.77***	.70***	—				
15. Intention_8	5.03	1.65	.79***	.73***	.71***	.69***	.82***	.80***	.82***	.82***	.76***	.56***	.77***	.74***	.78***	.81***	—			
16. Credibility trust	3.64	1.06	.91***	.88***	.91***	.86***	.84***	.81***	.85***	.73***	.68***	.49***	.70***	.70***	.69***	.76***	.82***	—		
17. Integrity trust	4.97	1.71	.82***	.77***	.76***	.73***	.96***	.95***	.97***	.77***	.73***	.56***	.73***	.72***	.73***	.79***	.85***	.87***	—	
18. Intention trust	4.70	1.42	.78***	.73***	.70***	.67***	.82***	.81***	.82***	.90***	.88***	.73***	.88***	.86***	.87***	.88***	.90***	.81***	.85***	—

Note. $N = 1{,}000$. "Misleading" is reverse coded. Credibility trust is the average score of trustworthy, sincere, infotrue, and misleading (reverse coded). Integritry trust averages the three integrity measures, and intention trust averages the eight intention trust measures. The intention trust and tntegrity trust items are reproduced in the experimental materials located in the additional online materials.
*** $p < .001$.

Table A5

Pearson Correlations for Evaluations of the Data-Only Author and Message Study 5

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Trustworthy	2.58	1.13	—								
2. Sincere	3.17	1.18	.66***	—							
3. Infotrue	2.62	1.17	.75***	.61***	—						
4. Misleading	3.33	1.37	.64***	.48***	.68***	—					
5. Capable	3.18	1.05	.64***	.58***	.61***	.52***	—				
6. Knowledgeable	3.06	1.18	.71***	.61***	.69***	.62***	.77***	—			
7. Skills	2.88	1.20	.73***	.62***	.72***	.61***	.75***	.85***	—		
8. Smarts	3.79	1.66	−.15***	−.18***	−.19***	−.16***	−.17***	−.23***	−.22***	—	
9. Honesty	4.16	1.58	−.13***	−.14***	−.21***	−.17***	−.15***	−.21***	−.21***	.72***	—

Note. $N = 796$. Smarts and honesty are the Likert response expressing a preference between the data-only and the data-in-SRPN authors as a partner in the smarts and honesty task, respectively. The measure is coded such that a higher number is a preference toward the author of the data-in-SRPN message. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.
*** $p < .001$.

(*Appendix continues*)

Table A6

Pearson Correlation for Evaluations of the Data-In-SRPN Author and Message Study 5

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Trustworthy	2.99	1.16	—								
2. Sincere	3.59	1.13	.74***	—							
3. Infotrue	3.11	1.15	.77***	.70***	—						
4. Misleading	3.73	1.29	.61***	.48***	.61***	—					
5. Capable	3.38	1.06	.61***	.52***	.58***	.48***	—				
6. Knowledgeable	3.35	1.15	.69***	.57***	.62***	.57***	.75***	—			
7. Skills	3.15	1.15	.71***	.58***	.67***	.57***	.76***	.85***	—		
8. Smarts	3.79	1.66	.19***	.18***	.17***	.13***	.22***	.19***	.21***	—	
9. Honesty	4.16	1.58	.24***	.25***	.22***	.18***	.19***	.19***	.18***	.72***	—

Note. $N = 796$. Smarts and honesty are the Likert response expressing a preference between the data-only and the data-in-SRPN authors as a partner in the smarts and honesty task, respectively. The measure is coded such that a higher number is a preference toward the author of the data-in-SRPN message. SRPN = self-revealing personal narrative.

*** $p < .001$.

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