Issue 20

Challenges in detecting deception

The recognition of deception is an inherently difficult task. Research studies show that individuals have a 50% chance in detecting deception, as well as having a built-in truth bias -- to assume that others are telling the truth. Unfortunately, research has shown that professionals, such as police officers, are generally no better than anyone else at detecting deception. Police and other professionals tend to have a lie bias-- they assume people are lying to them more often. The task of detecting deception is difficult because of several reasons:

- Personal bias

- Lack of training

- Misapplication of techniques and indicators

- Unreliable cues and outdated, nonscientific cues

- Lying often involves only subtle, hard to detect changes in behavior

- Countermeasures—liars can employ techniques to appear to be credible while not telling the truth.

- Embedded lies in a truthful account—deception within a generally truthful account is harder to spot

Detecting deception often involves effective interviewing. Often, a police department will pull a patrol officer off the road to interview someone. This means the officer is good at eliciting information and making people feel comfortable. When an interviewer is too busy asking the next question, and not listening or watching behavior after asking a question, it is a recipe for disaster. This may be because it is difficult to concentrate on asking questions while also looking out for verbal and nonverbal signs of deception.

Interviewers, to be fruitful, must allow for the interviewee to talk, expound on their answers and then and only then can follow-up questions be asked. Asking cognitive questions that require an interviewee to commit to a story, and asking follow-up questions and details that a truth teller possesses, leads to more valuable responses to help expose deceit. Detecting deception can also be more fruitful if the interviewer is able to establish a "baseline" of the person being interviewed. Good interviewers are trained to detect the correct cues to deception, tend to listen to what is being said and observe behavior. Some researchers state that other reasons why deception is hard to detect is that people are good liars. Some individuals engaged in deception have lived by deception their whole lives, such as criminals and spies, and are somewhat skilled at it. Therefore, some people are more accomplished at and better prepared to lie than others may be.

A deceiver who does not show emotion, such as fear or nervousness, is not necessarily a good liar. This is why I said previously that the effective equation for behavior recognition and detecting deception is observation and engagement. Less nonverbal behavior cues to deception being displayed doesn't mean one cannot expose deception with effective questioning, follow-up questions and fact checking. The other problem with the field of deception and behavior recognition is one that people consistently and erroneously want to link certain behavior cues to deception. There are wives' tales, myths and flat-out wrong training that lead people to making the wrong assessment as to the veracity of an individual's story or statement. There is no reliable, scientific evidence that liars perform any action in particular that indicates they are lying.

Finally, there is no research literature that supports the claim that liars move their eyes differently and look in one direction. The eye movement concept is based on the eye accessing cues model in the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) approach. In fact, the founders of NLP, Bandler and Grinder, have never discussed this claim. NLP has never been proven to have a direct correlation to deception. You are accessing parts of your brain when you answer a question, but just because you looked up to the right or to the left does not mean you are necessarily lying. Understanding what precipitated the nonverbal cue is essential. What did you ask that caused the behavior? What happened that caused the behavior? Taking in such factors can reveal to you that someone may know more than they are saying based on what was shown by their behavior after you asked a certain question or asked them to expand on an answer.