Chapter five.

detecting deception.

detecting deception from behavioural cues.

A number of books have been published that claim to reveal behavioural cues to lying. Some have focused on the criminal setting and have been based on experienced investigators’ beliefs about such cues. Unfortunately, recent criminal psych- ology research has found much of what such books claim to be signs of deceit to be mistaken. That is, although relevant professionals and lay people in several countries share the same beliefs about supposed cues to lying, these beliefs are largely wrong. In this section we will look first at the beliefs and then at the reality.

beliefs about cues to lying.

A recent review of many dozens of studies about behavioural cues to lying reported, as have previous reviews, that people think liars avert their gaze more (i.e. look you in the eye less), move their hands and feet more, shift their body position more, gesture more and touch their own body more. The reason why people think this probably relates to the fact that such behaviours are fairly useful indicators of nervousness. If liars are nervous then they may behave like this.

Many of the beliefs about signs of deceit rest on the assumptions that when people lie they experience emotion and they may have to think about the lies. The problem is that people telling the truth may well do the same. Innocent suspects may become emotional and have to think hard when being questioned by the police, especially if the interviewers are forceful, aggressive or coercive. When one is emotional it is often difficult to remember things, so that even recent experiences are hard to remember. On the other hand, some criminals may not be emotional about their crimes or during police interviews (which they may have experienced many times). They may well also have taken time to prepare and practise their lies so that they come to mind easily.

Given that there seems to be strong agreement among people about which cues they believe would indicate lying, liars will, of course, share in this knowledge. They will therefore try, when lying, not to give off these cues. This is a likely explanation of the surprising yet consistent finding from psychological research that people are usually poor at detecting lying in others.

A recent review of studies of how good people usually are at detecting lies from behavioural cues demonstrated that they are typically little or no better than chance at this. The main reason for this is that when most people lie they do not usually behave in line with other people’s beliefs about cues to lying.

So what does research tell us about how people usually behave when lying? A recent overview of many dozens of previous, world- wide studies concluded that there are no perfectly reliable behavioural cues to deception. The previous studies had in total examined over 150 possible cues. The cues that had been examined in several studies did not produce the same effect across the studies. That is, while some studies did find a cue to discriminate to a certain extent between lying and truth-telling, other studies did not. However, relatively few of the studies involved ‘high stakes’ situations (i.e. the cost of the lies being detected would be high in real life terms). Those that did produced rather few behavioural differences and the strength of the differences was not high.

Most of the research that has just been reviewed above involved lie detectors who were not relevant professionals (e.g. they were students). Perhaps professionals would be better at detecting deception.

how good are professionals at detecting deception from behaviour?

Professor Aldert Vrij of the University of Portsmouth briefly overviewed published research on how good professionals (e.g. police officers) seem to be at detecting deception from behavioural and speech cues, and offered reasons to explain why their performance to date seems far from perfect.

His overview of ten studies of professionals found an average accuracy rate for detecting lies/truths of fifty-five per cent, which is not that different from chance (at fifty per cent) nor from that achieved by non-professionals. In only a few studies have professionals performed better than chance (e.g. sixty-four per cent for USA secret service agents). A major criticism of almost all published studies involving professionals is that the video clips shown to them have not been of people lying in real-life, high stakes situations (but usually of students lying for the purposes of the experiment).

Due to the ever-growing mutual respect between British police forces and criminal psychologists, which a number of psychologists have over the decades worked hard to achieve, we were able to secure comprehensive assistance from a large police force in England to conduct a realistic lie detection study. This involved real-life police interviews with suspects that were video recorded. These recordings were observed for the purposes of our study by a large sample of police officers (not involved in the investigations). We found an average lie/truth accuracy rate of sixty-five per cent (which is significantly better than the chance rate of fifty per cent), with the lie detection rate being sixty-six per cent and truth detection sixty-four per cent. Furthermore, those officers who were more experienced in investigative interviewing performed better. Interestingly, those officers whose beliefs about cues to deception fitted with lay people’s stereotypical beliefs (for example, gaze aversion, fidgeting) were the poorest at detecting lies/truths and those who mentioned ‘story’ cues (e.g. amount of detail, contradictions) were the best. (For more on ‘story’ cues see the section below on analysing what people say.)

So why are many professionals such as police officers far from perfect at detecting deception? Professor Vrij has suggested a number of reasons that are based on psychological theory and research. First, and perhaps foremost, there are dozens of research studies on how people actually behave when lying, which consistently have revealed that when lying compared to when they are telling the truth some people show increases in certain behaviours, while other people show decreases or no change in the same behaviours. Furthermore, in some lying/truth-telling situations a person’s behaviours may increase, but the same person’s behaviours may decrease in other deceptive situations. There are several possible reasons for this. One is that when the stakes are higher (as in our study involving real-life police interviews with suspects) emotions may be stronger, thus affecting behaviour more. Another is that many people when lying try hard not to give off the cues they believe people look for in liars (e.g. increases in behaviour), and they either succeed in this or they over-control their behaviour, resulting in decreases. Yet another might relate to whether liars have had time to prepare/practise their lies. When we analysed the behaviour of the police suspects in our study we found lying to be associated not with the cues people commonly believe in (see the above section) but with a decrease in blinking and in hand/arm movements (females) and an increase in speech pauses. A further reason why many professionals seem poor at lie detecting is that they may concentrate their efforts on analysing people’s behaviour (especially facial cues – some of which are, in fact, among the easiest for liars to control) rather than on their speech content and on how they say it. Such a focus would seem counterproductive if speech cues are better guides to lying (see the section below). However, if the police conduct interviews with suspects in ways that do not effectively encourage the suspects to speak (see chapter 4), they will produce fewer speech cues. This is one reason why police interviewers who are unprepared and not properly trained may often make lie detection mistakes when interviewing suspects (e.g. letting a guilty person go free).

So how might professionals become better lie detectors? First of all, they need proper training on how to conduct information gathering investigative interviews (see chapter 4). Secondly, they need training (based on the results of relevant, published, quality research rather than on speculation) to avoid relying on the stereo- typical but wrong cues (see above), and guidance on which cues can be better guides, with the clear acknowledgement that even these cues are not that reliable as indications of lying. Furthermore, they need training to overcome other false beliefs such as (i) honest or attractive-looking people lie less and (ii) people who look nervous are liars (when they are probably just socially anxious or introverted). Then, they need to understand that if professionals behave in an accusatory or aggressive or suspicious way this in itself may well result in the person giving off cues that the professionals believe to be signs of lying. They also need training to combine useful cues from behaviour and from speech (see the section below on combining lie detection methods). Finally, they need guidance on how to avoid revealing near the beginning of the interview most or all of the information they have about the crime and the suspect (see chapter 4).

training to detect deception from behavior.

A number of books that claim to improve people’s ability to detect deception have been published. However, many of the behaviours these books claim to be guides to deception are not valid cues. A small number of better quality research studies have been published in which participants observe video recordings of people that have been analysed for which behaviours best discriminated between their lying and truth-telling. Some of the participants were told which cues actually discriminated and some were not.

The effects of such training have usually been found to be weak. One reason for this could be that people may find it difficult to ignore their own (false) beliefs about which cues indicate lying and therefore they benefit little from the training. Over the decades psychological research has repeatedly found that when people are emotional their range of attention narrows and they are more reliant on their basic, well-established beliefs. Thus if training (as it should) offers them new ideas they may not employ these in emotional/stressful/difficult situations.

A few years ago in the USA one psychological experiment involved training half of a group of students in cues that a book for interrogators claimed were related to deception. The trained group were worse than the untrained group on a subsequent detection deception task!

In one of the better studies on this topic, Canadian parole officers and students received training that involved:

myth dissolution (information that common beliefs about cues to deception are usually wrong).

describing the cues that some research studies have found to indicate lying in some people.

feedback on how accurate were their lie detection decisions.

Overall, there was an improvement across the training, but some of this could merely have been due to practice. Nevertheless, this study highlighted the importance of receiving feedback on the accuracy of our lie detection decisions, which is something that professionals rarely receive (e.g. a customs officer questions some individuals, believes them and therefore does not search their bags which do, in fact, contain illegal items). On the other hand, prison inmates may have experienced feedback (e.g. from their judgements of others who might lie often) concerning whether their judgements were correct. This could explain why a study in Sweden found prisoners to be better than chance (i.e. sixty-five vs. fifty per cent) at detecting deception when observing video tapes made at the University of People lying or telling the truth.