

1941

What the Lie-Detector Can't Do

Paul V. Trovillo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paul V. Trovillo, What the Lie-Detector Can't Do, 32 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 121 (1941-1942)

This Criminology is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

WHAT THE LIE-DETECTOR CAN'T DO*

Paul V. Trovillo†

A lie-detector, as used today, usually is an instrument for the recording of changes in blood pressure, pulse, respiration, and electrical phenomena of the skin. It functions as an aid in determining whether or not a person under investigation is telling the truth. Such instruments are found today in many police departments where trained examiners are daily recording the peculiar patterns of mental conflict and emotional stress pointing toward a criminal suspect's innocence or guilt.

Lie-detectors are not infallible; neither are they mechanical scarecrows to frighten the timid. Often their use may assume unusual importance in helping to separate the innocent from the guilty; and from the disturbed reactions of the guilty the examiner may be able to obtain more precise information as to the details of an offense than is possible with many other techniques. However, neither the operator nor the investigators having the test made should expect too much of the instrument. The accompanying illustrations were prepared to call attention to a number of situations which, among others, make it difficult—if not impossible—for an honest examiner to furnish a conclusive report of innocence or guilt. It is hoped that examiners unfamiliar with the limitations of the test, and investigators who are contemplating its use, may find these illustrations of some value and interest.

* The sketches which are reproduced in this article were made by Mr. Paul Kreger of the W. P. A. Illinois Art and Craft Project.

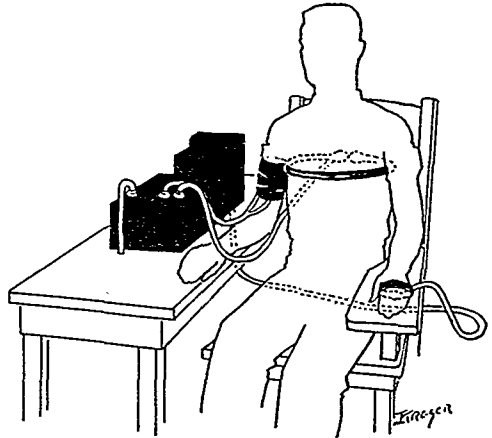


FIGURE 1

A lie-detector, such as the one at the Chicago Police Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory, employs the following attachments: a blood-pressure cuff attached to the bared upper arm; a pneumograph tube, to aid in measuring rate and depth of breathing, encircling the chest; and electrodes affixed to the back and palm of one hand and connected with equipment for registering electrical skin reactions.

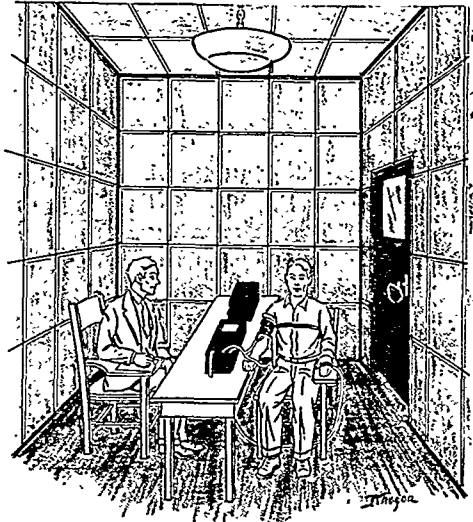


FIGURE 2

Lie-detector tests should be made in a quiet, private room, where all disturbing stimuli can be controlled or eliminated.

† Forensic Psychologist, Chicago Police Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory.



FIGURE 3

The nervous excitement of the innocent can generally be differentiated from the indications of guilt.



FIGURE 4

The attitudes of callous indifference found among some "repeaters" may prevent detection of deception.



FIGURE 5

A man who understands more than he wishes to admit! He is setting out to delay and confuse the examiner and thereby prevent a deception diagnosis.



FIGURE 6

The examiner would be happier if only our friend could understand that last question; and if he could experience the *all-essential* fear of detection.



FIGURE 7

The insane make better subjects for the psychiatric clinic than for the lie-detection laboratory.



FIGURE 8

A lie-detection test is most successful if made before extensive accusation of the suspect elsewhere.



FIGURE 9

Some people complain unduly about the pressure applied to the arm during the test. Their usual reason for complaining is to discourage further testing.



FIGURE 10

If only he had not partaken of so much of the liquid shortly before appearing for his test as a key witness!



FIGURE 11

A satisfactory recording of the blood pressure, pulse, and respiration cannot be obtained on subjects as fat as the one shown here!

It is because of just such situations and personalities as here illustrated that competent lie-detection examiners cannot always render a definite report as to the subject's innocence or guilt. Because of the very nature of a lie-detector test, occasionally a report must be indefinite, and this is true even when the examiners are exceptionally well prepared for their work. This field of investigation is not so precise in its findings as firearms or fingerprint identification, and the evidence should not be taken before the courts until it is more precise.

If examiners and investigators alike will accept the instrument *only* as an additional investigative technique and as a specific aid in disclosing significant emotional excitement, and not as an infallible detector of lies, much good can come from its extensive use.

In spite of the limitations of today's tests, the lie-detector's advantages have



FIGURE 12

This fellow has just been given a first-class beating by some of his outraged neighbors. He is in no shape for a lie-detector test.



FIGURE 13 .

Conscientious operator who wants to write a conclusive report of subject's innocence or guilt. He won't be able to because he has just examined the people shown here!

made possible a new tool of police investigation. Its virtues are best appreciated by those police officers and others who have witnessed with their own eyes the applications of lie-detection technique in the interrogation of criminal suspects.