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LIMITATIONS OF THE LIE DETECTOR

Maurice Floch

The author has been a clinical psychologist in the Detroit House of Correction for the past 16 years. After graduation from the University of Michigan he has pursued graduate work in the fields of Sociology, Social Work, and Abnormal Psychology, and has done special research and published studies on drug addiction and alcoholism. In his present paper Mr. Floch points out certain limitations on the lie detector which make it especially unsuited for examination of penitentiary inmates.—EDITOR.

There was a time when there was considerable enthusiasm about the possibilities of the Lie Detector. It was believed that it would furnish considerable scientific help in determining innocence or guilt in criminal cases. It was to mark a new era, free from the crude third degree methods, when the mere threat of being placed under the lie detector test would bring about confessions more certainly and quickly than any amount of violence inflicted by burly police detectives. Since then the clamor died down somewhat, and the lie detector was relegated to the role of one among many other useful instruments for the detection of crime.

The Lie Detector, as is well known, is based on the principle that an emotional disturbance will register in the physiological reactions. It is assumed that, if an individual should lie about some matter, he will develop a certain amount of anxiety due to pangs of conscience, and this anxiety in turn will cause his blood pressure to rise, his respiratory and pulse rates to increase.

It would seem, however, that theoretically there are some significant deviations in reactions to the test which should make the findings of the lie detector somewhat dubious. For example, there is the asocial, childish personality type, the individual who has no appreciation of the significance of falsification. He has either not learned the commandment, "Do not bear false witness," or else, has failed to develop an understanding of the important difference between falsehood, based on his own desires, and reality. This individual can very well utter any number of lies without pangs of conscience or anxieties.

The second exception would seem to be presented by the antisocial characters who consciously embark on a criminal career and believe that the main purpose of their lives is to please themselves. On this account, a lie to them is a perfectly acceptable instrument preferable to any silly concept of truth. Thus, the antisocial types, because of their philosophical orientation—if one can call it that—have absolutely no anxieties when uttering falsehoods.

Finally, we come to the pathological liar type which, owing to a serious emotional derangement, lost the ability to differentiate between reality and fiction. The pathological liar certainly will not show any significant reaction to the lie detector test.

Prof. Fred E. Inbau in his *Lie Detection and Criminal Interrogation* makes adequate mention of these exceptions. However, he maintains that it is chiefly the fear of detection, rather than any other factor, which produces the measurable physiological reactions. The present writer would put conscience in the same class. After all, psychologically conscience is also fear of detection. Only the fear is of the superego or moral principles which, in the final analysis, represent the father or authority in general. In brief, conscience is fear of detection and retribution and not an abstract concept.

Much depends, therefore, on the sophistication of subjects. The asocial, childish individual is certainly unsophisticated. At the same time, he also finds it difficult to envision future consequences. Every experienced examiner is acquainted with the simple subject who will lie with the greatest unconcern even in the face of the weightiest evidence. The fact is that, not desiring to see the truth, he cannot comprehend why others would see it.

Apropos the antisocial character's fear of detection, he is not infrequently quite sophisticated and is contemptuous of the abilities and methods of legal authorities. Often, he knows that the apparatus is not acceptable to the courts. Hence, if he had not much conscience to begin with or had rationalized it away, he is not apt to show any significant lie reactions because of any fear of detection.

Considering then these possible deficiencies, it is surprising to note that, of late, at least one state parole board is making use of it as an aid in the determination of innocence or guilt for commutation recommendations. In referring to two lifers, a man and a woman, the following statement was made in the *Detroit News* of June 22, 1949:

... "Mrs. Storick has maintained through her long years of imprisonment that she was innocent of poisoning her first husband in 1923.

A recent lie detector test indicated she was telling the truth.

The board also announced that it will interview William H. Padgett, who was convicted of first degree murder in Ann Arbor but successfully passed recent lie detector and truth serum tests. Padgett was sentenced for shooting Clifford Stang, Ann Arbor policeman, during a store robbery in 1935. He maintains he was in York, Pa., at the time . . ."

Such employment of the lie detector test is even more objectionable than its utilization for trial evidence because, outside of the already mentioned defects, it has an additional and still more important weakness. Specifically, the lie detector test does not make allowance for the condition called "circumscribed amnesia" so well described by a physician of the Ionia State Hospital for The Criminally Insane of Michigan. This doctor noted from his many years of experience that there were individuals to whose conscience or superego the crime they committed was so thoroughly unacceptable and reprehensible that they go through an immediate, unconscious process of repression which leaves them with a complete forgetfulness or amnesia of the events of the crime. These individuals, then, could calmly sit through a lie detector test and deny the crime without showing any physiological changes inasmuch as the instrument does not tap the unconscious itself.

There is still another type occurring in parole work which the lie detector cannot successfully reach. Here the present author draws upon his many years of experience in institutional work. He refers to lifers who shortly after the crime, for which they were imprisoned, emotionally rejected the act itself and succeeded in hypnotizing themselves, during the many years of their imprisonment, by sheer wishful thinking into a denial of their crime. These cases are similar to the so-called "circumscribed amnesia" cases except that the amnesia of the crime does not come about with the dramatic abruptness of the former but rather through a gradual process of self suggestion. Members of this last group when facing the lie detector test, having as was said before hypnotized themselves into a denial of the act, will naturally behave as if they had been altogether innocent. Significantly, this exception is also recognized by Prof. Inbau.

Should the lie detector test be widely utilized in parole work, it would assist in the liberation of many guilty but pathologically inclined individuals in preference to those who admitted the commission of an act and have since then gone through a process of emotional re-education and re-evaluation. This latter group should make them far better prospects for community adjustment than the pathologically inclined, un-rehabilitated individuals who continue to deny their offenses. These, having rejected the reality of the crime itself, will obviously never make an attempt to obtain understanding of their personalities through psychotherapy.