Polygraph Testing: The Lie Detector Myth

Nataly De Freitas

Dartmouth College
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If you are innocent then you have nothing to hide, or do you? Imagine you are accused of a crime. Alone, in a sparsely furnished questioning room, you nervously await the arrival of the polygraph examiner. You know you are innocent, you want the world to know you are innocent, and the polygraph seems like a certain way to prove it. Still you are nervous. As the examiner secures rubber tubes around your chest, a blood pressure cuff on your arm, finger plates on your fingertips, and sensor pads under your feet you begin to sweat. You try to calm yourself, just answer the questions, you think, and I can go home.

Your situation is common. Polygraphs, like the one described, are widely used by both law enforcement and government agencies for investigations, screenings, and verifications. They are ubiquitous in popular culture and seen by many as a reliable way to separate the guilty from the innocent. According to Psychologist Scott Lilienfeld, 67% of Americans believe it to be reliable in lie detection (2010, p. 122). But is this the case? Many argue that it’s not and there is a wealth of evidence suggesting that even innocent people have something to worry about when it comes to the polygraph.

One of the biggest problems with the polygraph is its unreliability. As your experience suggests, the test measures physiological responses in order to indicate deceptiveness. The tubes around your chest keep track of your respiratory rate, the cuff measures your blood pressure, the finger plates evaluate your sweat, and the sensor plate monitors the movements of
your feet (Bronsor, 2001, p. 1). No change will go unnoticed as you answer the examiner’s questions and each measurement will factor into his evaluation of your honesty.

But, when it comes to proving your innocence this may not be a good thing. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “there is no evidence that any pattern of physiological reactions is unique to deception” (2004). So, what if your physical reactions aren’t the “right” ones? In that case, your test will become one of the many that indicate an innocent person as deceptive. And with the significant error rates that the polygraph produces, this isn’t unlikely (APA, 2004). In fact, the test’s accuracy may actually be as low as chance or as high 60% for honest subjects and 85% for guilty ones (Lilienfeld, 2010, p. 120). In other words, as you answer each question, there is a 40% chance that you will ultimately be determined to be lying, even though you are telling the truth.

Yet, you have options. You could try to beat the test. Regardless of legality, there are many people that claim to be able to fool the polygraph and they even offer to teach others. And, according to the APA, these countermeasures may be effective (APA, 2004). They are also easily available, as they are published all over the internet and in books, as any google search demonstrates. These measures include pharmacological as well and physiological and psychological interventions that could calm you down or alter your physical state just enough to pass with the “right” reactions (APA, 2004).

Even if you don’t try to beat the test, there is still some good news for you. Because “most psychologists and other scientists agree that there is little basis for the validity of polygraph tests” it is generally inadmissible in court (APA, 2004). However, this won’t stop investigators from focusing on you and intently trying to prove your guilt nor will it stop your friends, family, or
employer from believing in you guilt. But what if you pass? You should be out of the woods, right? Wrong.

You’ve taken your polygraph now and you are anxiously awaiting the results. You can’t wait to be vindicated and cleared of all wrong doing, and then they drop a bombshell. You failed. Investigators tell you that you were lying to them. They pressure you to tell them the truth. They tell you that they understand; they are compassionate. Anyone might’ve done what you did. They just need you to confess so they can help you. You are shocked and scared. How could you have failed? You know that the polygraph works; maybe they are right. Maybe you did do something wrong. You don’t know it but the investigators lied to you. You passed the test, but confused and under pressure you are now on the brink of a false confession. And, even though your polygraph isn’t admissible in court, your confession will be.

This is exactly what happens to many polygraph subjects. According to the Chicago Tribune, in various “cases in which Chicago murder suspects went on to be cleared -- some after spending years locked up -- police polygraph examiners were accused of making up a confession, using "trickery" to get an admission and telling a suspect he failed a polygraph that an outside expert would later deem too poorly administered to determine its result” (Eldeib, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, there are hundreds of documented cases of wrongful convictions by false confession (Jackman, 2016, p. 1). Further compounding the problem is the potential for bias on the part of the examiners. Because the test results are interpreted by examiners, who often have prior access to information on their subjects, they are vulnerable to confirmation bias (2010, p. 199). In other words, if the investigators already think you are guilty your polygraph test will likely confirm their belief.
In court, your confession will probably be used against you and, despite your protests of innocence, your credibility will be severely damaged. Faced with your own confession and the threat of a long prison sentence you find yourself tempted by a plea deal. You make the best choice you can. As you sit in your jail cell passing the long hours in thought, you wonder just how everything could have gone so very wrong.

Now rewind the clock. You are back in that sterile questioning room, nervously awaiting the polygraph examiner. Sitting in a hard chair, under flickering fluorescent lights, you realize that you have another chance. Somehow, you are back where it all started. You know you are innocent; you know you have nothing to hide. Do you take the test?
References


