



D20 Forensic Polygraphy in a Global Environment: Comments on the Worldwide Growth of an “American Obsession”

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be educated on the early history of “lie detection” in the United States and how it influenced the public perception of the role of forensic sciences in the resolution of criminal investigations. More to the point of the theme of this AAFS meeting, the audience will also learn about the global growth of “lie detection,” a component of forensic Credibility Assessment, as it has been adopted in countries outside of the United States.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by revealing a rationale for global growth in the field of forensic polygraphy and demonstrating how U.S. based developmental features in that field specifically and the forensic sciences generally, good and bad, have been influential elsewhere.

In his recent book, *“The Lie Detectors,”* historian Ken Alder, focused on the personalities credited with the early development of the “lie detector.” Leonarde Keeler, Dr. William Moulton Marston, and Fred E. Inbau are prominently featured. However, Alder’s perspective, generally, is antagonistic. “The “lie detector,” he says, is a peculiarly American device. Americans, and Americans alone have been obsessed with the “lie detector.”” “Why, despite the avalanche of scientific denunciations, does the United States—and only the United States—continue to make significant use of the lie detector?”

Alder answers his own question by stating that: “The lie detector has thrived in America because the instrument played into one of the great projects of the twentieth century: the effort to transform the central moral question of our collective life—how to fashion a just society—into a legal problem.” “In the end, though, we believe in the lie detector because—no matter what respectable science says—we are tempted.” The “lie detector,” more appropriately, the polygraph instrument, was indeed fashioned in the United States. The use of that instrument, in its early history, was given extraordinary media attention. And, of course, the device captured the public imagination as it played a key role in many of the most heinous and media-driven criminal investigations of the time, such as the Lindbergh kidnapping. The “lie detector” focused attention on the forensic sciences in the way that DNA has today. Much of the attention was driven by the expectation that the “lie detector” would forever alter social relations; criminal activity, because it could no longer be hidden from the authorities, would be dramatically reduced. Some of this thinking was the result of promotion by early practitioners. Dr. William Moulton Marston, for example, was especially prominent. He promoted in many ways, one still popular today: his comic book character Wonder Woman, who with her magic lasso could ensnare the most pathological liar and learn the truth.

Aside from the media attention and the sensationalized publicity “lie detection” received, there was also a more serious side. The “lie detector” became one of the mainstays in the nation’s first Crime Laboratory in Chicago, eventually to be headed by one of the early Presidents of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Fred E. Inbau. He deserves credit for taking “lie detection” with a polygraph seriously. He brought to forensic polygraphy a sense of professionalism and a belief that it deserved a proper place among the various forensic techniques.

History shows that the polygraph was used in Europe since at least the 1950’s, possibly earlier. An astute observer of polygraphy today, though, would surely see that the field has been and is continuing to expand dramatically, more so outside of the United States than within. This is not because American gimmickry is easy to pass on to naïve audiences. Nor is because other countries wish to be foolhardy, to defy the ostensible wisdom of American criminal courts and scientific opinion as Alder argues. The record shows that there is clearly something more going on here. It is undeniable that in spite of its many flaws and limitations, the field of forensic polygraphy is growing dramatically around the world. Why is this so?

In this presentation the growth in forensic polygraphy will be assessed using a number of primary sources of evidence: membership rosters in professional associations, the development of training schools catering to those with an interest in polygraphy, the interest shown in U. S. government-sponsored attendance at international conferences on polygraphy, published descriptions of the development of polygraphy in a



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number of countries, and internet-based searches of popular media focused on polygraphy-related articles of interest.

In addition to discussing the growth of polygraphy on a global basis, in this presentation there also will be commentary devoted to polygraph testing as it can be seen in contrast to other forensic techniques. Some of this will be revealing of a rationale for global growth. In reinforcement of that rationale, the presentation will conclude with a discussion of empirical data collected to uncover reasons for the growth in polygraphy as seen by those outside of the U.S. who have experienced it firsthand.

Forensic Polygraphy, Worldwide Lie Detection, Forensic Credibility Assessment