From My Perspective . . .

An Experimental Psychologist Searches for Clues to Deception

Aldert Vrij, PhD

When I was at high school, I wanted to go to university. It was much clearer to me where I would like to go (Amsterdam) than what to study. In fact, I had little idea, so my parents sent me to a company that specialises in testing high school pupils for study and career interests. After one day of testing, the verdict was that I would probably like to practice law, but that I would find studying law too boring and most likely lacked the motivation to finish a course that I thought to be unexciting. The company advised me to study psychology.

At first I enjoyed Amsterdam considerably more than studying psychology. However, when preparing for exams, I loved to read about all the clever experimental designs researchers came up with to simulate real-life events. I liked it so much that I volunteered to participate in many psychology experiments carried out at the university. I found taking part in studies equally interesting as reading about them. Then I knew what I wanted to do; I wanted to become an experimental psychologist.

Luckily enough, the supervisor of my masters dissertation thought I would be good enough to complete a PhD when I told him that I wanted to continue in academia. A conversation with another psychology lecturer in Amsterdam led to the topic for my PhD. That lecturer’s wife was a schoolteacher in Amsterdam, and she noticed tensions in the classroom between children from different ethnic backgrounds. She also saw that the children behaved differently according to their ethnicity, and she wondered whether these differences in behaviour could create problems in the classroom. My PhD topic was chosen. I did not intend to examine differences in behaviour in children, nor did I fancy carrying out research in the classroom, but I proposed instead to examine differences in the behaviour of adult suspects of different ethnic backgrounds when being interrogated by the police.

In my PhD project, I examined differences in behaviour displayed by white Caucasian Dutch people and black Dutch people originating from Surinam, a former Dutch colony. We ran the experiment in our mobile laboratory (a converted truck) in shopping malls in Amsterdam. We asked shoppers to participate in a study where we examined how the police interrogate suspects. Their task would be to take on the role of suspects! In fact, we videotaped the participants rather than the police interrogator and, of course, we informed each participant about this after their interrogation had terminated. The experiment revealed large differences in behaviour between the white and black “suspects.” For example, the black suspects looked away more from the (white or black) police interrogator, and also fidgeted and stuttered more. In follow-up experiments, black and white actors acted as suspects in a police interview. We instructed them to display “typical white” nonverbal behaviour in one version of the video (e.g., less fidgeting) and “typical black” nonverbal behaviour (e.g., more fidgeting) in another version. White police officers observed these video clips and indicated how suspicious they found each suspect. A clear pattern emerged. Whilst the suspects’ skin color didn’t affect the perceived suspicion, their nonverbal behaviour did: Suspects were found to be more suspicious when they displayed “typically black” behaviour than “typically white” behaviour.

After my PhD, I applied for several lecturer positions at universities in the Netherlands. I was invited for several interviews (I had published quite a few articles by then), but did not succeed in securing a job, partly because my area of expertise, psychology and law, was not a priority in social psychology departments in the Netherlands. My research area was at that time more popular in the United Kingdom, and I was appointed in 1994 as a lecturer in social psychology at the University of Portsmouth. I am still here.

After examining which behaviours appear suspicious, I thought the next logical step was to examine how liars and truth tellers actually behave. This was my main research activity for the next decade or so, but I got frustrated by the lack of clear findings. The nail in the coffin regarding nonverbal cues to deceit for me was Bella DePaulo’s excellent meta-analysis of cues to deception, published in the *Psychological Bulletin.* In that important study, she and her coauthors demonstrated that nonverbal cues to deceit are faint and unreliable.

I started to look at verbal cues to deceit instead. The results were certainly more promising, but I thought improvement could still be made. My idea was this: Can we ask questions to which truth tellers respond differently from liars? I reasoned that cognitive psychology has more to offer in this line of research than social psychology, and I started collaborating with the cognitive psychologists Ron Fisher and Par Anders Granhag. I am glad to notice, 10 years after starting this line of research, that an increasing number of academics have become interested in this topic.

It is not just researchers who are interested in this “interviewing to detect deception” line of work. It attracts interest from many practitioners worldwide. And these practitioners are working in the worlds of law enforcement, security, law, and finance. This results in extensive traveling, and I would be able to travel all year around if I were to accept all invitations I receive. Of course, I cannot accept all invitations because it would make my other core activity impossible: teaching social psychology to undergraduate students. I enjoy teaching undergraduates because I like to stir their enthusiasm for social psychology. Another reason why I do not wish to travel too much is because it distracts from what I still like the most: designing experimental studies with my undergraduate students, PhD students, and Research Fellows.

Dr. Vrij is a Professor of Applied Social Psychology at the University of Portsmouth, UK. He not only travels for his work, but also for personal enjoyment. He has traveled extensively to Africa, Asia, and South America. Currently, his personal travel pursuits include discovering outdoor swimming pools (and he says there are certainly some exciting ones in the world).