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One of the most intractable and long-term problems facing security and intelligence policymakers is that of identifying people who are good at detecting deception. At the 2000 American Psychological Association Annual Convention, James Forrest and Robert Feldman of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst reported on data supporting two relevant hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that people who have accurate beliefs about the cues associated with deception are more likely to detect deception in others than people with inaccurate beliefs--when the respective beliefs are activated. Second, suspicion concerning other individuals will be likely to activate beliefs about cues associated with deception--and without activation accuracy will decline.

The data supporting these hypotheses are welcome but suggest some of the difficulties that scientific psychology has in usefully informing public policy. The first concerns the nomothetic-idiographic distinction--even the idiothetic compromise. In this case, the study provides nomothetic information, while policymakers in many security and intelligence activities often require idiographic information. "In general" information--whether normatively or ipsatively--necessarily falls short for the unique case-by-case basis. The second concerns policy utility. In this case, the study is at least implicitly founded on the notion that there are correct beliefs about deception in terms of ontological validity and that these beliefs either appropriately change or otherwise remain useful in the face of counterdeception techniques once the beliefs become known to those who seek to deceive. The third concerns sensitivity-specificity. In this case, the notion of suspicion activating beliefs must be tempered with qualitative and quantitative distinctions wherein suspicion in many ways becomes dysfunctional--something that has an unfortunate history based on the well-known and at least quasi-paranoid counterintelligence errors manifested by James Jesus Angleton during the latter part of his career. Another example would be distinctions wherein accurate beliefs may lead to worse detection and inaccurate beliefs to accurate detection based on various moderating and other intervening variables.

The whole notion of systematically and wittingly detecting deception may be no more than an ideological component supported in some ways by certain epistemological tools, unsupported by others--the tools themselves being ideologically contaminated. Such a research perspective also merits further attention. (See Al-Simadi, F.A. (2000). Detection of deceptive behavior: A cross-cultural test. Social Behavior and Personality, 28, 455-461; Bond, C. F., Jr., & Atoum, A. O. (2000). International deception. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26, 385-395; Forrest, J.A., & Feldman, R.S. (2000, August). When accurate beliefs lead to better lie detection. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.; Heinrich, C. U., & Borkenau, P. (1998). Deception and deception detection: The role of cross-modal inconsistency. Journal of Personality, 66, 687-712; Lamiell, J. (1981). Toward an idiothetic psychology of personality. American Psychologist, 36, 276-289; Lane, J. D., & DePaulo, B. M. (1999). Completing Coyne's cycle: Dysphorics' ability to detect deception. Journal of Research in Personality, 33, 311-329; Mangold, T. (1991). Cold warrior. James Jesus Angleton: The CIA's master spy hunter. A Touchstone Book.) (Keywords: Deception, Lie Detection.)