

2-23-2001

Trends. Annual Polygraph Report to Congress: The Emperor Still Wearing No Clothes?

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2001) "Trends. Annual Polygraph Report to Congress: The Emperor Still Wearing No Clothes?," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 7 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol10/iss7/2>

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Title: Trends. Annual Polygraph Report to Congress: The Emperor Still Wearing No Clothes?

Author: Editor

Volume: 10

Issue: 7

Date: 2001-02-23

Keywords: Department of Defense, DOD, Polygraph

Abstract. This article describes some theoretical and methodological concerns with the approach of the United States (US) Department of Defense (DOD) towards establishing the validity of the counterintelligence-scope polygraph (CSP).

US Public Law 100-180 authorizes the DOD CSP Program in the effort to deter and detect activity involving espionage, sabotage, and terrorism taken to harm US security interests. To this end, CSP examinations are conducted on military personnel, DOD civilian employees, and DOD contractor personnel. For example, according to the DOD Polygraph Program Annual Polygraph Report to Congress for Fiscal Year 2000, 7,890 underwent a CSP examination. Of these, 7,688 were judged non-deceptive based on physiological indices and provided no substantive information to the contrary (suggesting the potential of security-inappropriate behavior), while 202 were judged otherwise and/or provided substantive information suggesting the potential of security-inappropriate behavior. Of the latter 202, 194 received a favorable adjudication, 3 are still pending adjudication, 5 are pending investigation, and no one received adverse action denying or withholding access to classified or sensitive information. And of the 202, 11 provided substantive information suggesting the potential of security-inappropriate behavior but continued to be judged as deceptive based on physiological indices.

What to make of the above data? One conclusion might be that no one needed to be examined in Fiscal Year 2000, because no one experienced a change in security status. Another might be that 8 might eventually require a change in security status. In this latter case, one might require a policy determination of whether identifying 8 or less security-vulnerable individuals is worth the expenditure of money, personnel, time, and materiel necessary to conduct 7,890 examinations. Yet another might be that at least 3 of the 202 received a favorable adjudication even though physiological indices continued to suggest deception--a conclusion that seems to cast a question on the whole notion of what the physiological indices of deception denote.

The conclusion that common physiological measures of the CSP bear on deception is based on several data sources. First, some individuals who tell the truth or lie on the CSP do look the way they should look on the physiological measures. However, there are significant false positives and negatives that detract from the investigative utility of this finding. Moreover, as the social context within which the examination occurs approaches the reality of an actual counterintelligence one, the actual pattern of true and false positive and negatives becomes more and more unknowable. In this regard, the anecdotal information provided by the Report that describes individually compelling cases of CSP examinees who were forthcoming about substantive information is not helpful to address this matter.

Second, some individuals in interludes before an imminent examination or during an examination--but before allegedly significant physiological indices of deception appear--do indeed "spill the beans" about security-inappropriate behavior. This finding, of course, does not bear on the validity of the physiological indices but on the social psychological phenomenon of the "bogus pipeline."

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Third, perseverative recitations of the CSP's validity by individuals whose own political and material power as well as professional reputation are dependent on beliefs in this validity often serve to reinforce the very conclusion of the CSP's validity. Yet between belief and Truth there can be disparity.

Fourth, there are perseverative recitations of the CSP's validity by others who believe it would be contrary to the security interests of the US to assert otherwise--regardless of the CSP's validity. Ironically, those most dedicated to US strength may be most weakening it.

Yet the CSP continues to make up over 70% of the overall DOD Polygraph Program. This is the case, even though the US Government's own data supporting the validity of the Test for Espionage and Sabotage (TES)--the primary CSP examination--are extremely tenuous. However, instead of going back to the drawing board to assess how the reductionist approach of physiological indices suggesting complex social psychological phenomena makes epistemological sense, DOD is marching on with ever more esoteric research projects and contracts intended to link physiological measures such as electroencephalographic, magnetoencephalographic, novel electrodermal, laser-doppler vibrometric, "Vericatric" (voice-based), and infrared thermal imaging data directly to deception or indirectly through something called psychophysiological "stress."

Although recent efforts to increase consistency of polygraphic technique and requirements for continuing education of polygraph examiners are positive steps, the notion that the emperor may be wearing no clothes may not be deceptive or must at least await its final adjudication. (See Department of Defense Polygraph Program Annual Polygraph Report to Congress Fiscal Year 2000. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/othergov/polygraph/dod-2000.htm>; Honts, C.R. (1992). Counterintelligence Scope Polygraph (CSP) test found to be poor discriminator. *Forensic Reports*, 5, 215-218; Honts, C.R. (1991). The emperor's new clothes: Application of polygraph tests in the American workplace. *Forensic Reports*, 4, 91-116; Iacono, W.G., & Lykken, D.T. (1997). The validity of the lie detector: Two surveys of scientific opinion. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 426-433; Saxe, L., & Ben Shakhar, G. (1999). Admissibility of polygraph tests: The application of scientific standards post-Daubert. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 5, 203-223; Terpstra, D.E., Kethley, R.B., Foley, R.T., & Limpaphayom, W. (2000). The nature of litigation surrounding five screening devices. *Public Personnel Management*, 29, 43-54.) (Keywords: Department of Defense, DOD, Polygraph.)