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The Search for Our Inner Lie Detectors

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Is a job applicant lying to you? What about your boss, or an entrepreneur who is promising to double your investment?

Most of us are bad at spotting a lie. At least consciously. New research, published last month in *Psychological Science*, suggests that we have good instincts for judging liars, but that they are so deeply buried that we can't get at them.

This finding is the work of Leanne ten Brinke, a forensic psychologist — she previously studied parents who killed their children and lied about it — who has turned her attention to the business world.

“Perhaps our own bodies know better than our conscious minds who is lying,” explained Dr. ten Brinke, now at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley.



MICHAEL WARAKSA

It's well accepted that most of us are no better than a flip of the coin at seeing a lie. A classic experiment involves showing study subjects videotape of people, some of whom are lying, who say they did not steal \$100; the subjects correctly guess the liars about half the time.

Dr. ten Brinke and her collaborators at Haas built on that experiment, with a twist: After the subjects watched the video and made their conscious assessments of who was lying, the researchers tried to measure the subjects' unconscious reactions.

To do so, the researchers flashed images of someone already seen in the videotape — but this time in milliseconds, indiscernible consciously. The subjects then completed a word task that involved placing “truth” words (like truthful, honest, valid) and “lie” words (dishonest, invalid, deceitful) into their proper categories.

When study subjects were flashed a picture of a liar, they were significantly slower to lump words like truthful or honest into the “truth” category, but faster to lump words like deceitful into the “lie” category. The opposite was true when the subjects saw a truthful person. So, in general, the same people seemed better at detecting lies unconsciously than consciously. By scientific measures, the size of the effect was decidedly non-trivial, but not overwhelming.

There are many theories about why the ability to pick out liars gets lost in translation to consciousness. Dr. ten Brinke speculated that we tell one another little lies all the time — for survival, reproductive strategy, and so on — and that part of getting along socially is being able to let those harmless lies escape notice.

Is it possible to tap into the unconscious ability? “It’s the million-dollar question,” she said. The study fits into a rich history of lie-detection research, with some researchers saying they can read lies in facial expressions, and others arguing that liars just don’t give off enough clear signals to allow detection.

“The cues are so faint,” said Dr. Bella DePaulo, a visiting professor of psychology at University of California, Santa Barbara and an expert in the science of lie detection. She said that there was some evidence, including her own research, that supported the idea of unconscious or indirect lie detecting, but she doubted that it would ever become a truly effective system.

Dr. ten Brinke has started a new experiment, one that she hopes will offer concrete tactics to help us identify liars. It entails measuring physiological symptoms like blood flow and perspiration in study subjects who are listening to a liar. That, too, is a twist. The traditional lie-detector test makes similar measures of a person suspected of lying. Maybe the better detector will be the person listening, at least if the conscious mind can be left out of it.