

SPEAKING OF RESEARCH

Behavioral Clues to Deceit

Research by Paul Ekman, Ph.D.
San Francisco, Calif.

Attendees at the 1996 Brief Therapy Conference in San Francisco were given a unique opportunity to participate in an ongoing research study. This interesting experiential element was part of the keynote address "Behavioral Clues to Deceit" by Paul Ekman, Ph.D., an eminent researcher and professor of psychology at the University of California at San Francisco. The participation of the audience is a component of a more extensive study done assessing differences among professional groups in their abilities to recognize lies. Ekman defined deceit as a choice to mislead without notification including falsifying or concealing information that there is an explicit obligation to reveal.

The audience was presented with a series of ten short videotaped interviews in which the subject was either lying or being truthful. Observers were asked to identify which behavior they felt was occurring. The audience was given pencils and answer sheets, asked to self-rate their abilities to discern truthfulness and then give their opinions about the videotaped subjects.

Following the exercise, Ekman gave a review of the research design and an overview of his 30 years of research into the nonverbal indicators of deceit. Behavioral signals appearing in the form of expressive incongruencies including gestural "slips" were demonstrated with the videotaped interview subjects.

In preparing the videotapes, Ekman had solicited paid volunteers.

The subjects were first given an entry examination, in which they noted their personal beliefs and convictions on various topics. This information was then sealed and used for confirmation of truthfulness. The subjects then were offered a monetary reward if they could successfully deceive researchers regarding their personal stand on a topic; they would be paid a bonus if they lied but researchers thought that they were telling the truth and vice versa. Conversely, if researchers correctly identified the subjects' truthfulness or deceit, the volunteers would not only forfeit the bonuses but also would be threatened with undesirable tasks. At this point, some elected not to proceed with the study. The subjects who continued provided a rich inventory of videotaped interviews; some of the volunteers chose to lie and others chose to tell the truth. All subjects were motivated to convince the interviewer of their own truthfulness.

The videotaped interviews were then examined for nonverbal indicators of deceit. It was found that expressive incongruencies were positively correlated with deceit. The incongruencies included "micro-expressions" (rapid or fleeting facial expressions) or "fragments" which involve some parts, but not all parts, of gestures associated with expression. An expressive "fragment" that was demonstrated on the videotapes included a "partial shrug" in which the subject momentarily lifted one shoulder and held out one hand. The "shrug fragment," or "gestural slip," was incongruent with the concurrent verbal message of certainty.

The research into nonverbal indicators of deceit headed by Ekman extends to the skills of correctly identifying deceit. Individuals with a high

capacity to correctly identify deceitfulness are being solicited for additional investigation. A few preliminary studies have indicated differential skills among various professional groups. For example, many federal law enforcement agents, including FBI and CIA agents, demonstrated an average ability, while Secret Service agents and a group of specially selected and trained police showed a higher ability to correctly identify deceit. ~~The preliminary study, done at the Brief Therapy Conference in which more than 1400 participated, suggested a higher than average ability to correctly identify deceit among subjects in the videotaped interviews.~~

This interesting study demonstrates the broad arena in which research investigation provides information useful in both personal and professional lives. I personally applaud Dr. Ekman for his use of the occasion to proceed with his research. It was a rare opportunity for audience members to see a committed researcher at work and to take part in a relevant manner as well as providing each participant with information about his or her own perceptual skills.

Reference:

Ekman, P. (1992). *Telling Lies*. New York: W.W. Norton

Research Summary by:

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Editor's note: The keynote speech was recorded in an audiotape distributed by the Milton H. Erickson Foundation, "Behavioral Clues to Deceit," Paul Ekman, Ph.D., Audiotape No. J241-K1, (\$10.50). The audiotape does not fully capture the videotaped photos, but does contain the audio interviews that accompanied the videotaping.

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