



Detecting true and false opinions: The Devil's Advocate approach as a lie detection aid

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ABSTRACT

We examined the efficacy of a new approach to detect truths and lies in expressing opinions: the Devil's Advocate approach. Interviewees are first asked an opinion eliciting question that asks participants to argue in favour of their personal view. This is followed by a Devil's Advocate question that asks participants to argue against their personal view. People normally think more about reasons that support rather than oppose their opinion. Therefore we expected truth tellers to provide more information and shorter latency times in their responses to the opinion eliciting question than to the Devil's Advocate question. Liars are expected to reveal the opposite pattern as the Devil's Advocate question is more compatible with their beliefs than is the opinion eliciting question. In Experiment 1, we interviewed seventeen truth tellers and liars via the Devil's Advocate approach and measured the difference in number of words and latency times to the two questions. Our hypotheses were supported. In Experiment 2, 25 observers were shown these interviews, and made qualitative judgements about the statements. Truth tellers' opinion eliciting answers were seen as more immediate and plausible and revealed more emotional involvement than their Devil's Advocate answers. No clear differences emerged in liars' answers to the two types of question. We conclude that the Devil's Advocate approach is a promising lie detection approach that deserves attention in future research.

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Several lie detection tools have been designed to aid criminal investigators to distinguish between truths and lies. Two of these, Statement Validity Assessment (SVA) and Reality Monitoring (RM), are the most widely researched (Masip, Sporer, Garrido, & Herrero, 2005; Vrij, 2005, 2008). The core of SVA is Criteria-Based Content Analysis (CBCA), a list of 19 criteria that are thought to occur more often in truthful than in deceptive accounts (Köhnken & Steller, 1988; Steller & Köhnken, 1989; Undeutsch, 1984). Vrij (2008) reviewed more than 50 CBCA studies, and found that several of these criteria discriminated reasonably well between truths and lies. A review of more than 20 RM studies showed a similar picture (Vrij, 2008). Several of the eight RM criteria discriminated reasonably well between truths and lies. CBCA and RM were designed to distinguish between truths and lies when people describe events that they claim they have experienced (e.g., being sexually abused). As a result, many CBCA and RM criteria focus on perceptual detail and examine what people report that they saw, heard, felt or smelled during these events.

Sometimes, however, it is important to distinguish between truthful and untruthful reports of people's *opinions*, where the topic

described by the person is not *perceptual*, but *conceptual*. In this type of deception-detection task, perceptually oriented tools such as CBCA and RM are inadequate. The goal of the present study was to develop a more conceptually oriented tool to discriminate between truthful and false beliefs. Determining the veracity of *conceptual* representations may not be important in typical police suspect interviews because these are mainly concerned with examining lying about transgressions. However, it can be important in many security settings, for example when deciding whether an informant is indeed as much (i) anti-Taliban or (ii) against Muslim fundamentalism as s/he claims or (iii) whether the sole reason for entering the UK or the US is indeed to study at a University. Incorrect veracity judgements can do irreparable harm in such situations, as demonstrated by the loss of seven CIA agents in Afghanistan on 30 December 2009. The CIA agents were killed via a suicide attack by a man they thought was going to give them information about Taliban and Al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal areas. The CIA was aware that the man had posted extreme anti-American views on the internet. However, it was decided that the views he had expressed were part of a good cover, and the possibility that they were his real views was discounted (*The Sunday Times*, 10 January, 2010).

In order to detect truths and lies about opinions we designed the Devil's Advocate approach. It consists of two questions. First, after someone expresses his/her opinion (e.g., "I am in favour of the war

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in Iraq”), the investigator asks an *opinion eliciting question*: “What do you think led to you having that opinion about this topic?” This question is then followed by the second question, the *Devil's Advocate question*: “Playing Devil's Advocate, is there anything you can say against/in favour of this topic?” (Interviewer asks ‘against’ if the interviewee had expressed a positive attitude towards the topic and ‘in favour’ if the interviewee had expressed a negative attitude towards the topic.)

The Devil's Advocate approach invites truth tellers to give reasons that support their true opinion in the opinion eliciting and to give reasons that oppose their true opinion in the Devil's Advocate answer. People tend to seek information that confirms rather than disconfirms their views (so-called *confirmation bias*, Darley & Gross, 1983), and are therefore likely to be able to generate more reasons that support rather than oppose their opinion (Ajzen, 2001; Waenke & Bless, 2000). In addition, people's knowledge about their own beliefs is likely to be more sophisticated and refined than their knowledge about other beliefs. Therefore, a truth teller's answer to the opinion eliciting question is likely to contain more words than his/her answer to the Devil's Advocate question.

The Devil's Advocate approach has the opposite effect on liars. They must manipulate their thoughts in an unnatural fashion. Liars are invited to give reasons that support their true opinion in the Devil's Advocate question and to give reasons that oppose their true opinion in the opinion eliciting question. Liars may therefore provide longer answers to the Devil's Advocate question than to the opinion eliciting question because, for liars, the Devil's Advocate question is more compatible with their beliefs than is the opinion eliciting question. There is a complication, however. Liars will attempt to mask their true opinion. In doing so they may attempt to generate as many reasons as they can think of in their opinion eliciting answers, and may attempt to restrain themselves from giving too many reasons in their Devil's Advocate answers. If they are successful in doing this, they, just like truth tellers, will give longer answers to the opinion eliciting question than to the Devil's Advocate question. Liars may find it difficult to fully employ this latter strategy, however. First, liars probably can think of many more reasons to report in the Devil's Advocate answer than in the opinion eliciting answer. Only providing a selection of those reasons in the Devil's Advocate answer may already result in providing more information than they can generate in the opinion eliciting answer. Second, liars may find it difficult to restrain themselves from providing information in the Devil's Advocate answer as people typically have a strong desire to speak out about topics they care about (Hayes, 2007; Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Hayes, Shanahan, & Glynn, 2001; Kim, Han, Shanahan, & Berdayes, 2004; Willnat, Lee, & Detenber, 2002). We therefore predict that truth tellers' answers to the opinion eliciting question will contain more words than their answers to the Devil's Advocate question, whereas liars' answers to the opinion eliciting question will be shorter or of equal length as their answers to the Devil's Advocate question.

Reasons that support an opinion are likely to be more readily available in someone's mind than reasons that oppose an opinion (Fazio, 1990; Tesser, 1978). Truth tellers therefore should reveal shorter latency times (time between a question asked and the answer given) when answering the opinion eliciting question than the Devil's Advocate question. Liars' latency times are more difficult to predict. In theory they should display the longest latency times for the opinion eliciting question. However, they may attempt to mask the fact that they are lying, which could, for example, result in the same latency time for both questions. We therefore predict that truth teller's latency time will be shorter for the opinion eliciting question than for the Devil's Advocate question, whereas liars' latency time for the opinion eliciting question will be longer or of equal length as their latency time to the Devil's Advocate question.

1. Experiment 1

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

A total of 17 undergraduate students took part in this experiment, 7 (41%) males and 10 (59%) females. Their average age was $M = 25.76$ years ($SD = 1.59$).

1.1.2. Procedure

The experiment was conducted in the Psychology Department of the University of Portsmouth. The experiment was advertised via posters distributed around the building, asking for students to participate in a study that investigates people's opinions on various contentious issues. The posters informed potential participants that they could earn £10 for taking part.

Participants were informed that the experimenters were investigating people's opinions and arguments for and against various issues. After consenting to the study, participants completed an Opinions Questionnaire which asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (where 1 = agree and 7 = disagree) with 25 different statements (e.g. ‘Women should have the right to an abortion’, ‘Gay couples should have the same rights to adopt a child as heterosexual couples’, ‘The UK immigration laws should be much tougher’, ‘The invasion of Iraq was necessary’). Finally the participants were asked via a 7-point Likert scale ranging from [1] not at all to [7] completely, the extent to which they had filled out the questionnaire truthfully (11 participants ticked ‘7’ on this scale and 6 ticked ‘6’, $M = 6.65$, $SD = .49$).

After completing the questionnaire, participants were taken into another room where the experimenter gave them a consent form outlining the next stage of the experiment. After reading this synopsis, all participants agreed to continue, and signed this consent form. Then the experimenter and participant together looked through the participant's completed Opinions Questionnaire and selected a statement that the participant had indicated strong agreement or disagreement with. Participants were then asked to lie about their opinion ($N = 8$) or truthfully argue their opinion ($N = 9$) in a subsequent interview. They were told that they would earn £10 if they were able to convince the interviewer that they were telling the truth. The experimenter noted on a slip of paper the question number from the questionnaire that the interviewer was to question the participants about. The interviewer was blind to the participant's truth, and did not know what opinion (for or against) the participants were going to express until the interview commenced.

The participants were then taken into the interview room. The interviewer first asked each participant his/her opinion about a topic: “What is your opinion about this topic?” This question was followed by the *opinion eliciting question*: “What do you think led to you having that opinion about this topic?” which was followed by the *Devil's Advocate question*: “Playing Devil's Advocate, is there anything you can say in favour/against this topic?” (Interviewer asked ‘in favour’ if the participant had expressed a negative attitude towards the topic and ‘against’ if the interviewee had expressed a positive attitude towards the topic.) During the interviews, nine participants told the truth and eight lied.

After the participants had answered the two questions, they were brought back into the room where they had just been briefed. The experimenter then debriefed the participants and ‘checked’ with the interviewer whether he had believed the participant. Regardless of his answer, all participants were told that the interviewer had believed them and were given £10 as a result. This was considered fair and ethical.

1.1.3. Dependent variables

All interviews were transcribed, and based on these transcripts we counted the number of words in the answers to the opinion eliciting

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