

Be More Skeptical About Body Language Analysis

Description

Body language analysis, sometimes called Synergology, is a popular way to learn more about what is going on inside a person's head. **It is a proclaimed "scientific discipline for reading body language."** [TSA](#) and FBI agents, negotiation experts, and YouTubers all proclaim that they can decipher people reliably using a set of tells to answer questions about a subject. What are they thinking? What do they want? Do they like me? Are they bored or interested or nervous? Was that statement a threat? The study of body language seeks to answer questions like this in a rigorous and consistent way.

But there is a problem.

Some of what has been proffered by so called industry 'experts' is either unproven or downright false.

How Effective Is Body Language Reading And Analysis?

The scientific standard for truth is a peer reviewed journal article that shows statistical significant findings. While this standard [isn't perfect](#), it is simply the best process we have. This process has found that some aspects of body language analysis are unable to consistently produce accurate readings.

Take for example deception cues. Many have hypothesized that when someone averts their gaze, reduces or increases their levels of eye contact, shift their body in certain ways, move their hands to cover areas like their face or privates, or tug or fidget with certain clothing and body items, they are lying. But a literature review of many studies on the topic suggest this isn't correct. When put up against the rigor of science, the methods simply fell short. See this site for [more on the topic](#) as well as the journal references (Hazlet 2006).

Interestingly enough there is one study, see here, that shows that you can train people to detect deception to a degree slightly better than chance. But ironically, the most accuracy in detecting deception comes when you tell people to ignore all aspects of physical appearance and behavior and instead tell them to focus only on the verbal content.

A Pseudoscience?

The main trouble is the sheer quantity of [misinformation spread about body language](#), coming even from supposed experts. Studies have found that even in the legal field experts have disseminated false information. For example studies have found that micro expressions, quick facial expressions that leak out of people and reveal their intentions, have no evidence as valid cues for detecting deception in real time. These have been taught to individuals in law enforcement as proven methods.

Some believe pseudoscience label would help quell this problem. Pseudoscience is set of scientific sounding propositions that are either unproven, wrong, or misinterpreted. It involves claims that are

contrary to the scientific method because they were not reached after screening for confirmation bias, unfalsifiability, lack of peer review, and other elements. According to this and similar definitions, **many aspects of body language analysis are pseudo scientific**. If you want to know more about the delineation between science and pseudoscience, see the [demarcation problem](#).

One example is what many consider to be a founding study for body language analysis. It has been misinterpreted. The study was about the idea of what behaviors communicate liking. In contrast, people cite the study as finding that 7 percent of **all** communication is verbal and 93 percent is non verbal. So we should study body language analysis so we can understand what a person's physical communication is saying. The author of the study has gone as far as to say "my findings are often misquoted... it is absurd to imply or suggest that the verbal portion of **all** communication constitutes only 7% of the message" (my emphasis). See this [article](#) for more.

So Why Do People Believe It Works?

One possible [explanation](#) is that there are **stereotypical beliefs regarding deception** and the body. People think these things are true and then confirmation bias takes over.

Another mentioned earlier is that people are **simply not competent** at deciding what is scientific and what is not. People don't understand how statistics work, the strengths and weaknesses of the peer review process, or how studies are limited in their ability to apply to real world situations.

Should We Be Skeptical Or Accepting?

So that means we shouldn't listen to anything they say, right? Well not necessarily. At some point all the things we see as scientifically accurate now, were once unknown or unproven. Eventually they were tested and found to be accurate. For body language, some small portion of the claims being made haven't been fully tested and rejected with years of scientific analysis. But many claims have been disproved.

So what do we do? We think the best way to approach body language, and any area of study in general, is to start with the things that have been shown to be accurate by science. You could spend years just learning and honing the techniques that we have already found to be accurate with out ever having to focus on those that are pseudo scientific. **Why would you waste your time studying potentially false things when you haven't even mastered the ones we have strong support for?**

Why Is Body Language Analysis So Common?

So if some of the body language analysis tools are false, why do organizations like the [TSA](#), FBI, and the police use elements of body language analysis? Well there are three reasons. First, organizations can use this unscientific information as a way to gather possible areas for further research and investigation. Maybe that twitch meant they were lying but maybe it didn't. Let's send an officer down to knock on the neighbor's house.

Second they could have simply made a mistake and not had the ability to distinguish good versus bad science. In a similar vein **organizational politics can often distort incentives and lead to sub optimal and unscientific outcomes.**

But more importantly, there are elements of analysis that are similar to body language analysis that are accurate. These elements are often lumped in with body language analysis. For example take the area of deception we discussed earlier. Some motions are not indicators of a lie. But they have found proof for other things. Stories meant to be deceptive frequently contained fewer details and sensory information. They have also found that people try to hide deception by eliminating the cues that they believe mark deception. These verbal assertions are not part of body language analysis, but might be lumped in with the subject.

Another issue is that there is often a significant difference between what they can find in a lab with scientific equipment and controlled environments, and out in 'the wild,' where we have no idea what a person is thinking about, focused on, what they just experienced, or what they think will happen.

A List Of Some Body Language Myths

- Looking to one direction over another indicates thinking or lying.
- Crossing your arms always means you are indicating resistance.
- Lack of eye contact means you are lying.
- Touching other people is always indicating dominance.
- Power posing raises testosterone and lowers cortisol hormones. It might make you feel better but it isn't from those hormones.
- Micro expressions of deception have no evidence of reliably detecting deception.
- Scratching your nose, lowering your head, and closing your mouth are reliably and proven indicators of deception.
- Slow rate of speech indicates deception.
- Blink rate increasing always means lying.

Check out this video that does a good job on the topic.

A Video On Science And Body Language

Category

1. Manipulation

Date Created

January 4, 2022

Author

admin