Five Milestones in the History of the Polygraph

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Looking back through the lens of history I believe there were five critical events that brought the polygraph profession to where it is today. Here are those events.

The Idea

Polygraphy began as the simple-yet-profound idea that cognitive activities revealed through physiological monitoring could be exploited for the practical purpose of assessing the statements of suspects. That idea was proposed by Hugo Münsterberg, the father of forensic science, in the early 1900s. In his classic text *On the Witness Stand* (1908), Professor Münsterberg presciently suggested that changes in respiratory, cardiovascular and electrodermal systems could be brought to bear on the

problem of detecting deception. Among the many readers of his book no doubt was a young Ph.D. student at the University of California (Berkeley), John Larson, who would take the next step.

The Test of the Idea

In about 1920 Dr. John Larson set up an assemblage of laboratory apparatuses to determine whether deceptive intent was accessible through bodily changes. They were. The following year Dr. Larson conducted the first real-world criminal polygraph test of record on April 19th in the College Hall thefts about which he wrote in the first polygraph article later that same year. While Dr. Larson eventually left the field, others working with him, C.D. Lee and Leonarde Keeler, created portable devices and captured the public's attention with their ability to solve high profile crimes.

The Standardization of the Protocol

In the early days of polygraphy examiners did not have defined testing and scoring protocols as we understand them now. It would not be until about 1960 when Mr. Cleve Backster introduced standardized testing and analysis procedures to his students. These important contributions made it possible for different examiners to come to a common conclusion regarding polygraph data, something we take for granted today. Mr. Backster's innovation also paved the way for independent quality control.

The Validation of the Protocol

Polygraph research was spotty, at best, before 1970. In the early 1970s then-graduate student Gordon Barland introduced Dr. David Raskin of the University of Utah to the polygraph. Dr. Raskin and his students subsequently began an unprecedented series of studies on the polygraph, developed almost all of what is known about polygraph countermeasures, improved manual scoring, created the first computerized instrument and algorithm, and refined testing procedures. Their body of work laid the groundwork for a field that heretofore had been dominated by practitioner-developed procedures to an endeavor with evidence-based methods.

The Shift to Best Practices

For most of the history of the polygraph, the polygraph school an examiner graduated from accounted for almost all of her or his philosophy toward polygraph testing. There were substantial methodological differences taught in the various polygraph schools, leading to large schisms in the polygraph community. In the early 2000s there was a gradual shift in the policies of the American Polygraph Association (APA) toward evidence-based practices. In 2007 the APA Board approved a standard that its members must use methods that are supported by scientific evidence beginning in 2012. The APA published a survey of defensible polygraph techniques in 2011 which led to a culling of the number of recognized polygraph techniques from more than 60 to fewer than a dozen. Today a test can be called invalid because it departs in a meaningful way from the supporting evidence rather than personal views shaped by different polygraph schools.

Conclusion

Tuvya Amsel's Introspection Project turns our attention from our local concerns to the big picture. Developing the long view of polygraphy rewards those who make the effort with patterns and trends that reveal the trajectory of polygraphy from how it began to what it might become. Little could the early pioneers have envisioned what 100 years of polygraphy would bring: polygraph programs around the world, computerized marvels to help conduct testing and analyze the data, a significant and growing body of supporting scientific evidence to guide our practices, and professional standards based on that evidence. We are living in a remarkable period thanks to the contribution of a relatively small number of individuals doing the right thing at the right time.

Like the forefathers of the polygraph, we cannot know what will come in the next 100 years. What great innovation is sitting in the mind of someone somewhere at this very moment that will transform the field yet again? What will the sixth milestone be?

I, for one, cannot wait to find out.