

## How (Not) to Spot a Liar: *Watch the Eyes*



If a witness looks up and to the right when answering your question, the witness is probably lying, right? Many people would say “yes,” including many jurors, lawyers, and perhaps even judges. But, that is likely one of the more persistent myths left over from the neuro-linguistic programming (“NLP”) movement of the 1980s. Recent, published, peer-reviewed research has now cast further doubt on this “lying eyes” claim.<sup>1</sup>

Many trial lawyers and jury consultants were proponents of NLP in the 1980s. Though an exact definition is elusive, NLP is essentially a set of theories regarding the interrelationships of language, mind, and body. Many NLP proponents claim, among other things, that carefully observing others’ body language will greatly enhance your skills at communication, persuasion, and rapport building. NLP was largely the basis for the popular claim that watching eye movements can give you insight into whether a person is telling the truth. The popularity of this claim is underscored by the many eye-movement/lie-detection tutorials that can be found online.

Research recently published in PLoS One addresses this claim.<sup>2</sup> The authors conducted three experiments. One involved telling participants to either be truthful or dishonest in response to interview questions. The interviews were video-recorded and eye movements were coded by independent raters. The second experiment involved teaching participants about NLP theories of eye movement and then having them attempt to detect liars. The third involved meticulously coding the eye movements of persons who made public statements to television news media that were later proven to have been either true or false.

None of the experiments revealed any support for the claim that persons who are lying reliably show any particular pattern of eye movements. The study also revealed no support for the notion that persons who carefully watch eye movements will be any more successful at identifying liars. The authors conclude by saying, “The results provide considerable grounds to be skeptical of the notion that the proposed patterns of eye-movements provide a reliable indicator of lying. As such, it would seem irresponsible for . . . practitioners to continue to encourage people to make important decisions on the basis of such claims.”

Over the last 15 years, NLP has increasingly come to be regarded as junk science. Nevertheless, aspects of NLP persist in both popular culture and legal culture. Why? Several psychological factors may be contributing. One is the desire, on the part of some people, for there to be a reliable correlation between eye movement and lying. When people believe something is true (or even just hope that it is true), they often search for confirming evidence and disregard contrary evidence. With greater weight and attention given to confirming evidence, people can subjectively discern relationships where, in fact, there is no relationship. Another is selective memory. Even if someone notices instances that contradict the claimed association, they may be more likely to remember (and tell others about) the rare instances that confirm the association, which then perpetuates the erroneous belief that the association is more often true than not true.

- 1 Richard Wiseman, et al., *The Eyes Don’t Have It: Lie Detection and Neuro-Linguistic Programming*, 7 PLOS ONE e40259 (2012).
- 2 PLoS One is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication that publishes original research from all scientific disciplines.