DON'T GET DUPED

An Interview with Dr. Tim Levine

Dr. Timothy Levine has dedicated his professional career to providing professional investigators with the research and perspectives necessary for them to enhance their careers. Dr. Levine has been studying communication and deception for over 30 years. Dr. Levine has held professor positions at the University of Hawaii, Indiana University, Michigan State University, Korea University and currently at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. To date, he has published 151 academic journal articles and he is widely accepted as one to the leaders in his field. His work has been referenced in countless research articles, textbooks and books. Perhaps most notably, his work informed Malcolm Gladwell's book *Talking to Strangers*. His book *Duped* represents a thorough reference of all things deception related and details his work around Truth Default Theory. Dr. Levine was kind enough to share his time, and a few of his insights with us. Below are the highlights of our conversation.

The following questions were asked by Michael Reddington, CFI, and all answers were provided by Dr. Tim Levine.

Q: What drew you to researching deception?
A: As you can probably imagine, I get that question a lot. I really got started on deception simply because I had three professors in my PhD program who studied it and I got assigned to one of them as a research assistant. I got a lot of exposure in graduate school to deception research, and I was really fortunate to study under one of the founders and some early leaders in the area. What became apparent to me was that the current thinking about deception was not aligning very well with the results of the studies. I was a young, ambitious academic who wanted not just get a professor job, but really to make a splash in my field. I was interested in persuasion. I got to meet Robert Cialdini as a graduate student and hang out with him at a reception a little bit. I just love persuasion. That's what I went to graduate school to study and my advisor for my PhD program had actually worked with Cialdini for a while Arizona State. That's why I picked Michigan State because of their persuasion work. But it seemed to me that persuasion research had its act together in a way

that deception research didn't. There was a lot of persuasion research, it was much more advanced and the theories were better. I thought if I'm going to go make a splash, I should be studying the topic where there's big findings left to find and not the topic where people are mostly just tying up loose ends. When I encountered deception research it seemed to me that that's where the big puzzles were. Every deception study I learned about, and every deception study I conducted, led to more questions than answers. To mix metaphors, I just started pulling on strings and finally I started getting places and pieces of the puzzle started to fit together. I think the story of my book, *Duped*, is about trying to put the puzzle together, and that took a lot of studies and a lot of trial and error. Once I found results that held up, I started putting them together and it was this really fun jigsaw puzzle. I think the topic could have been anything. I needed something to study where the answer wasn't already known and where there was room to come up with an answer that wasn't already out there. It was kind of intellectual opportunism that really brought me to deception.

Q: With all of the studies you've reviewed and conducted, how have you seen deception research evolve over the last 30 years?
A: If we go back 30 years, the really big influential stuff was Paul Ekman, and leakage, and clues. Also, Bella DePaulo's early work which I would contrast with her work in the late 1980's and 1990's. Her early work was very wrapped up in the idea of trying to find predominantly non-verbal cues for deception and behaviors that if you spotted would be tells of deception and hold across people and across situations. Then, around 1990, Judee Burgoon and David Buller came onto the scene and they had a particular idea of how deception worked under the label of Interpersonal Deception Theory. Their work became increasingly technology focused when Judy moved into the business school at the University of Arizona. They started doing increasingly complex studies involving almost artificial intelligence, kind of machine learning. Then Aldert Vrij came around and kind of the whole legal criminal psych camp from Europe started focusing on cognitive effort rather than emotions. They just completely rejected

Ekman. They're absolutely convinced that telling lies is more cognitively effortful then telling the truth, and that verbal cues, as opposed to nonverbal cues are more diagnostic. My work, tends to kind of reject the whole cues thing altogether. I focus on demeanor, which affects what people believe, and content which is what gives away whether someone should be believed or not, in combination with the situation and the prior knowledge that you bring to the table. I think deception research has become more fractured than ever. There was a time when I pretty much thought I'd read everything that had been published and that's nowhere even close to being true anymore.

Q: What might you say has been the most surprising conclusion that you've come to with your research?
A: I think there are two that stand out. One of these is more applicable to your audience, and one is more applicable to the general public. I think everybody who is even a little familiar with deception detection research knows about the 54% finding. It shows up in almost every study that's

ever been done. I think of findings that hold up as falling along a continuum from temperamental to robust. So, you can have a really good finding that holds up, but only in a narrow bandwidth of circumstances. If all the stars align, then it is a good finding. In contrast, a robust finding is one where you can do it in America or you can do it in China. You can do it with males, or you can do it with females. People can be suspicious, and it comes out or people cannot be suspicious and it still comes out. The finding pretty much always comes out the same way. The 54% finding had the illusion of being very robust. You could turn off the video or turn on the video. You could use students, or you could use experts. It could be strangers, or it could be people that know each other. You can give them access to baseline information or not. You always find slightly better than chance. Well, it turns out that the slightly better than chance finding isn't nearly so robust. There are a couple particular things you have to do to get it. One is you have to ask people to guess whether people are lying or telling the truth. If you don't give them any kind of knowledge that the task is about detecting deception, then deception doesn't even come to mind most often.

If you are a professional interrogator and you're interviewing a suspect, you know to be on guard for deception. If you are in the supermarket and you ask somebody where's the coffee and they say, on isle three, truth or lie doesn't come to your head. I don't think people realized just how often the idea of being deceived doesn't even occur to us. And this is the whole idea behind the Truth Default Theory. The other thing about the 54% finding is that it only applies when there is an equal probability between truth and lies. There are two things researchers were doing that we almost didn't know they were doing. One is they were always showing an equal number of truths and lies. And second, they were always asking people, "do you think this is a truth or a lie." It turns out 54% is a product of doing both of those things. If you showed people all truths or all lies the finding would not be 54% anymore. If you did not ask them if someone was lying it wouldn't come to mind most of the time. So that was a big surprise. It probably shouldn't be a surprise. It's only a surprise if you know the research findings first and then realize the power of these two limitations, or these two design features, that just transcend all the studies.

Q: As you look back over your research, what would you say might be the most important conclusion that you've come to?
A: I think another really important finding was people are more gullible than they think they are. That is probably a good thing because most people really are honest. Most store clerks won't send you to the wrong aisle intentionally. I think my demeanor findings are really important as well. This is the idea that cues do not travel alone. They travel in constellations, they are given off in constellations and they are perceived in constellations. These constellations do not affect whether you should be believed, but they do affect whether you are going to be believed. I think knowing that if you do, or don't do, the 11 things that comprise honest and dishonest demeanor it would be incredibly useful to politicians who want to get elected. This would also be incredibly useful to salespeople who want to have their customers trust them. This would be incredibly useful to travelers who want to get through TSA without going through secondary screening. I try to practice them when I'm going through customs. I certainly practice them if I ever get pulled over by a police officer. I try to practice them in the classroom when I'm teaching because I want my students to believe what I'm teaching them. I just think that there's a lot of practical

value in the do's and don'ts related to coming off as a believable and credible person. Knowing that how someone is coming off might not be diagnostic of their internal states can be really important. So many people fall for friendly extroverts. They have such a such a huge advantage. If you're hiring someone you need to remember that there's more to the job than just being a friendly extrovert. This has such a powerful impact in interviews and interviewers get sucked into it and forget to look at the candidates' resumes and their qualifications. People fall victim to the friendly extrovert. If it's you, you want to be the friendly extrovert. But if it's a decision that matters you want to consider more than the fact that the person you're talking to is a friendly extrovert.

Q: From your book *Duped*, can you please provide us with a brief overview of Truth Default Theory?
A: The first thing I'd say about Truth Default Theory is that truth default is actually only a small part of the theory. The basic idea of the Truth Default Theory is what I was talking about earlier. Unless you have a reason to think that somebody might be deceptive the thought usually doesn't come to your mind. In our everyday interactions we tend to believe people. Even if we do have a reason to suspect them, we're more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. By and large people tend to get tricked by liars. I haven't found what some other researchers have regarding the experts' predisposition to lie bias. They believe experts in the field are lie biased. I think the research says they are just less truth biased than non-experts. We'd rather believe people than not. Then there's this idea of triggers. These are the things that first get us to wonder if we are being told the truth and the second set of triggers which cause to determine we've been lied to. Some triggers have more usefulness than others. The behavioral triggers probably have less of validity than some of the content and evidence-based triggers. Then there's also the whole other side to a Truth Default Theory where most people are pretty honest and most lies are told by a few prolific liars. People lie for a reason. When they don't have a motive to lie, everybody's honest. When people do have a motive to lie some people will still be honest in spite of the fact that honesty is not in their interest. Lying can be very predictable and assessing motives is actually a very good way to go about detecting deception. It's not definitive, but it can really help. Two of the huge paths to detecting deception accurately are considering the evidence when it's available (and plausibility when it's not) and trying to encourage people to tell the truth.

Q: How would you recommend interviewers approach deception detection during their interviews?

A: It's really important to go in open-minded. It's also really important to go in with as much information as possible. If you go in cold, and don't know what you're looking for, my guess is you're handicapping yourself and forcing yourself to rely on your situational familiarity. If you're investigating bank fraud, it really helps to know a lot about bank fraud and how it usually plays out. I wouldn't presume that a really good bank fraud investigator would be a really good homicide investigator. Within homicides I think probably domestic homicides play out very differently than other types of homicides. It doesn't mean that there's aren't exceptional cases though, so you've got to remain open-minded. My context is academic research and I would like to think I'm pretty good at spotting fishiness in academic research simply because I read so much of it and I do so much of it. This really helps when I'm reading other deception work. I kind of know if you do the study this way, this is probably how your results are going to be, so I know when warning bells come up. When these warning bells come up, I don't think cheater or fraud. I think, that's odd, I wonder what's going on? It doesn't necessarily mean they're committing fraud. Somebody wins a lottery and the odds are against them. It's a combination of really knowing your ground, remaining open-minded, and not locking in on a single interpretation too quickly.

Q: How do you believe an interviewer's mindset affects their ability to obtain the truth?

A: I think there is a difference between going in seeking truth and going in to close the case. On one end you want to get to the bottom of what's really going on. On the other end you want to find fault and whether they are guilty or not is not really what you're looking for. Even if you go in looking for the truth we know from psychology that one of the biggest biases humans fall victim to is confirmation bias. Once we have an opinion, we want it to be right. Personally, this is the thing that really worries me most about my own research, because I'm really worried that I may start to drink my own Kool-Aid. Being aware of confirmation bias puts you in this weird cognitive never-never land that's not very comforting, but that ties into open-mindedness. I think the best thing investigators can do is be committed to the truth and having some

and those aren't a hundred percent safeguards but I think they'll probably take you an awfully long way.

Q: How do you believe an interviewer's communication style may impact their ability to get the truth?

A: I think in general you get more with honey. If you can establish rapport it will be a huge benefit. Communicating empathy is also important. You don't really have to empathize with the person, but if they think you are, then they're much more likely to open up to you. I think it's absolutely critical to use your own style. Watching the experts in my studies really convinced me that it's not a one size fits all situation. There's not only one way to be good. I think different people can be good at being themselves, and I think there's different themselves who can be very good. Generally open-minded flexible, friendly, rapport-based interviewers are going to be more successful. But I think there is room for variation so long as you're committed to the truth and you're good in your own skin. I think if you're trying to use a style that's not actually yours it's probably not going to work as well.

Q: How do you believe interviewers can use their observations to their advantage during the interview process?

A: One of Ekman's ideas I really like is the idea of hotspots. I have absolutely no objection to using cues as hotspots. If you see somebody looking distracted you should try to figure out why they're distracted. If you see somebody looking anxious or reacting to a question, you should try to figure out why they're reacting to it. I think if you locked in and said this means deception then that's going to make you wrong. If you go in understanding that the cues won't be the same for everybody and they might not mean what you think they mean, you have a better opportunity to determine what they likely mean. It seems to me that if something's catching your attention and your professional radar is saying this might be important, then you should pay attention to it. The experts in my research definitely used cues. They would see cues, but they wouldn't jump right to deception. Every time there was a cue they would continue with the conversation and then they would cycle back to the issue that triggered the cue several minutes later. And they were really good about fine tuning their questions to figure out what was going on. They were exceptionally observant. The

other advantage of doing this is now you can start assessing consistency. We know that consistency isn't necessarily diagnostic but it is one of those great things that should be treated like a hotspot. Humans just aren't consistent beings. We contradict ourselves all the time without being deceptive and sometimes liars have the straightest stories. Nevertheless, when you observe an inconsistency, it's good to circle back and try to figure it out.

Q: What are the biggest questions that you would still like to try to answer through your research?

A: One of the studies I would really like to do is to see if we can train honest demeanor. It seems to me that that it would be pretty valuable if we could train it. As a professor I think there are two key questions that dominate communication and that people really don't have great answers to. The first question I have is how do we really communicate? I don't think I've ever seen a really super satisfying explanation on how I can take these ideas in my head, translate them into words, say them to you, you understand them and then you respond to me. How really does that work? Understanding it to the extent, let's say, that we understand the combustion engine. We know why cars move. We know how rockets work. But we don't understand communication at that level. And the second question I have is what makes good communicators good at communicating? Those are, the two things that I wish I knew. Those are the two really big questions. If somebody solves those if we could have a C Q communication portion that was as good as the IQ test, that would be pretty amazing.

Q: Is there any data that professional interviewers may be able to share with you that would benefit your research?

A: I would love videotapes of real interrogations where the truth has been adjudicated. I mean those would be gold if they are available.

Q: Where should our members go to find more of your work and, or reach out to you if they are interested?

A: Thank you for asking. They can visit my website to see more of my work. All my contact information is there as well. Of course they can buy my book *Duped* for the full scope of my work.