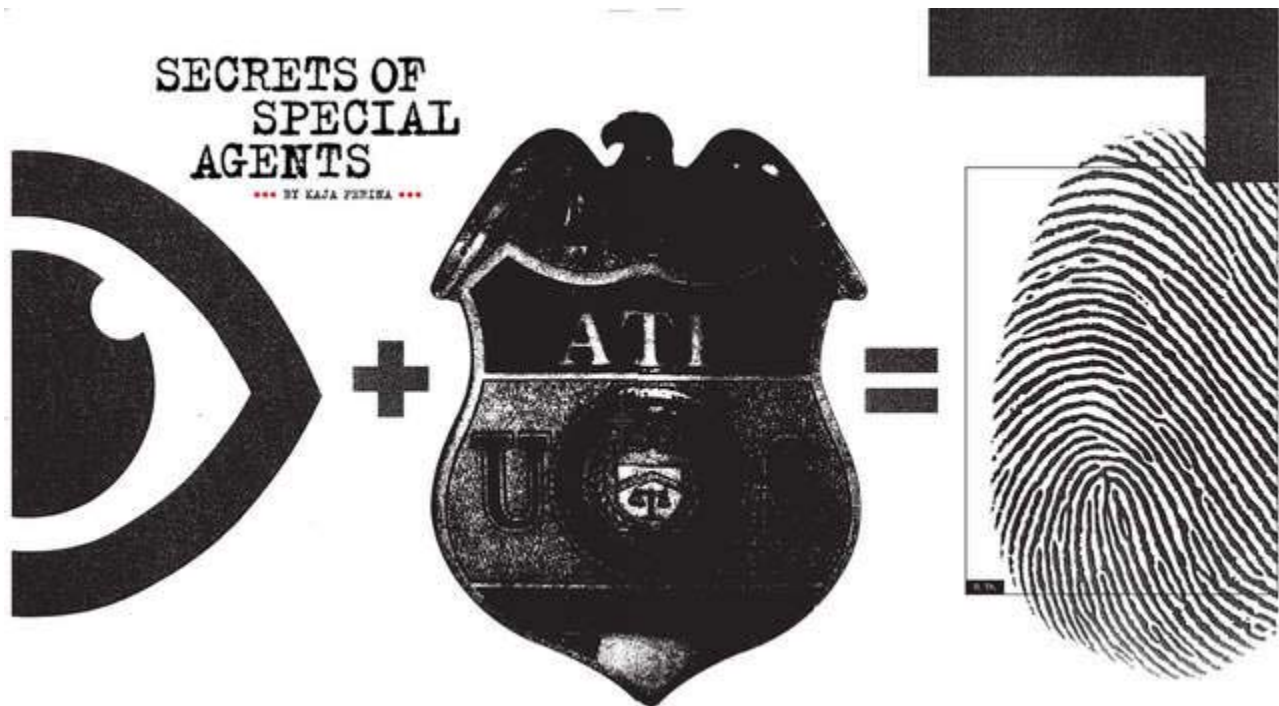


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Secrets Of Special Agents

by

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There was a logical clue and there was an emotional one. Each was apparent on the stoic visage of Anita,* a woman in her early 20s who was being questioned at an ATF field office in Oakland, California.

She'd arrived from nearby Richmond, an industrial port that always finds its way onto the national crime blotter. For years the town was terrorized by drug lords, the most notorious of whom was One-Eyed Marvin. Like all despots, Marvin demanded total fealty and exacted fatal revenge. At the height of his reign, in the early 1990s, he was the chief suspect in the death of Anita's cousin, machine-gunned outside Johnny's Diner, a local hamburger joint.

Anita shared her story with two attorneys and two ATF agents: She'd been walking to the back of the burger stand when gunshots rang out—and instantly she dove under a parked car. She'd heard the shots, but her position under the vehicle blocked her view of the assault, she explained.

James (J.J.) Newberry was the street agent on the case, in charge of the ATF task force on gangs in the East Bay. He sat down next to her and asked to hear the story one more time.

"I pulled my convertible into the lot, got out, and headed to the back of the stand," Anita began.

"Why were you going out back?" Newberry inquired.

"To take a leak," Anita replied. "I heard the shot, and dove under the car."

"She didn't show any facial responses, no emotion," Newberry recalls today. "She just kept looking ahead."

"Did you have a sense of impending danger?" he asked.

"No," she responded.

"Thank you," said Newberry, and stood up to leave. Then, he recalls, "I banged the table with my fist."

Anita turned to stare at him.

"What did you just do?" Newberry asked. "You looked to see where the noise came from. You looked that night, too. You saw the man who shot your cousin."



J.J. Newberry saves the question "why" for last. "I ask where, how, when," says Newberry, whose ability to detect deception sparked psychologists' decades-long quest for so-called truth wizards. "If I ask why, I may get the truth, but it'll be a justification."

Anita began to cry. She confessed that she had, indeed, witnessed the murder. Al Mabanag, the second ATF agent who was present, recalls that the woman's attorney was thunderstruck by how quickly Anita had confessed the truth to Newberry. Why, the lawyer wondered, had Newberry asked about "impending danger?"

"If she'd sensed a threat, her reaction—and lack of emotion in telling it—would have made sense. But it wasn't logical to hear gunshots and not look," Newberry explains. "Only combat veterans do that."

People who read others well have a talent for seeing the invisible. At their best, they instantly glean information about us that we ourselves do not know. They seize on gestures of discomfort, micro-expressions of anger, inconsistencies of language—signals that others routinely miss. And they assemble the data into sometimes instant hunches about the character they're dealing with. They operate along inductive and deductive channels simultaneously: A shrewd reader is often as quick to typecast personality as he is slow to judge the veracity of the information coming out of a person's mouth.

No profession has a lock on mind reading. But a few (former) federal agents who have mastered the science and refined their own approach provide a window onto the judgments that most of us make unconsciously and not nearly as successfully. J.J. Newberry's lie detection abilities earned him the moniker "truth wizard" and sparked psychologists' two-and-a-half-decade quest for equally capable lie catchers.

Joe Navarro and John (Jack) Schafer each spent years in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Program, an elite task force that investigates "targets of interest to national security," which in James Bond-speak means spies and suspected double agents.

Schafer is a word maven who has a keen sense of what ordinary locutions cover up; Navarro's bailiwick is body language. He can "see" unconscious distress in the graze of a hand against the neck. But for all three, success hinges on seeking the answer to one question: What motivates this person in this moment?

One can learn a lot from such a simple approach. Capable detective work may be more *Dale Carnegie* than *Lie to Me*—a slow inquiry into another person's state of mind, not a "gotcha" match that could blow up into a false confession. The process requires that interviewer and target be in rapport; only then can one identify a deviation in a person's baseline—and that, usually, is the first clue to a problem.

"On an elevator I'll find out what I can between the first and fifteenth floor," says Newberry. "I try to make people comfortable and if they're not, I want to know why." Newberry is soft-spoken and his physical presence is muted; perhaps the most noticeable characteristic about him is a tic in his right eye. He retired from the ATF in 1998, and lives on a secluded ranch in Northern California. "I pick up a lot of horse shit," he says when asked to describe his daily schedule. The same might be said of his professional life—he consults on cases that local officials fail to solve.

Newberry likes to recount an incident from the beginning of his career in which a truck bomb killed a woman and child. At the scene was a man, rocking back and forth.

"I got down on my knees and said, 'This is hard. I know you didn't mean to do it.'"

"No," the man responded. "She took the wrong car."

Why did Newberry approach the man this way?

"Just a gut feeling."

“J.J. does it intuitively,” observes Gretchen Fretter, a former police detective who has taught interviewing techniques alongside Newberry. “He is better than anyone I know.”

Newberry’s interrogation style eventually led him to teach interview techniques to other agents. His most popular training tactic was the “hot seat,” in which he’d ask an officer about his sex life so that his peers could parse the embarrassed man’s reaction. In the late 1980s, Newberry showed up at the lab of Paul Ekman, czar of lying studies, hoping to codify the tactics he himself used and taught.

“J.J. was talking about building rapport,” recalls Mark Frank, who studies nonverbal signals and deception detection at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and was then a doctoral student with Ekman at the University of California in San Francisco. “J.J. was observing real cops in real situations and understood that the best interviewers put others at ease. It made sense, even though it was not how things were done in law enforcement at the time.”

Newberry stood out for another reason as well: He was the first person to score 90 percent across the board on the lab’s tests of lie detection.

Most people catch lies at rates only slightly better than chance. There are no bulls-eye “tells” that a person is lying. A lack of eye contact, quavering voice and descriptive vagueness are all signs of lying—but they can also be signs of anxiety, or personal quirks. A woman who buries her face in her hands, clears her throat, and closes her eyes for a fraction of a second (stalling!) is as apt to disgorge a painful truth as she is to perjure herself.

As Ekman and others have shown, the most reliable signals of deception pertain to the cognitive effort and emotion that surround the lie itself. A person who lies may exhibit discomfort or what Ekman calls “duping delight.” Microexpressions of fear and anger, even a sinister smile, may flash across a face. In the verbal realm, changes in word usage, word flow, or voice pitch may signal the extra cognitive horsepower lying demands.

Most people don’t register these fleeting signals, or fail to correctly interpret them. And while no one claims that lie detecting predicts an across-the-board understanding of people, both hinge on successfully decoding shades of emotion.

“You have to be able to read an emotion that a person is aware of, recognize emotions that a person is experiencing that he or she is unaware of, and recognize emotions that people are aware of but don’t want you to know,” says Ekman. One must juggle such input all the while knowing that accurate signal sorting is only the first step; it does not reveal why an emotion is in play.

Newberry proved able to spot lies about crime, lies about beliefs, and lies about emotion (the hardest for most people to discern). He received a perfect score on the emotion test, in which a subject must judge whether 10 nurses are truly viewing and describing pleasant footage of the seashore, or whether they are lying about viewing this film while in fact watching distressing footage of surgical procedures. The implications were clear: “If one person could do it, there had to be others,” recalls Ekman.

Thus was born the quest for “truth wizards,” a project later spearheaded by Ekman’s colleague Maureen O’Sullivan, an early pioneer in the social intelligence field, who died in

2010. At the time of her death, O'Sullivan had identified 50 wizards, after testing as many as 15,000 people. To qualify, one had to score at least 80 percent on two of the three tests.



Jack Schafer trolls for information with the "presumptive" statement—a benchmark against which people define themselves. "You use Jane Austen-esque language," he once told a writer, who then enumerated the daily challenges that prevented her from matching her literary idol.

Many wizards had years of specialty training—therapists, writers, and law enforcement officers are well represented. But the common denominator, O’Sullivan told me in 2009, is not their profession but their “Rolodex” approach to personality. They develop homegrown typologies, based on their unique experience in the world. “Wizards talk about personality differently than do controls,” O’Sullivan said. “They have inborn talents: visual acuity, pattern recognition, emotional sensitivity. They don’t all have all of these. But they also have the motivation to read people.”

There are likely many pathways to this motivation. One study found that children raised in adverse circumstances are better at detecting deception than are those in stable environments, a finding that might shed light on Newberry’s aptitude.

The only child of an enlisted officer and a saleswoman, he ran interference between his alcoholic father and long-suffering mother. “My job was to get my father past the NCO club and to our base housing,” he says of his boyhood in Hawaii. “I’d take my bike and meet him at the hangar damn near every night. I could see when he needed a drink—the muscles in his face would change. He would start making excuses for doing something or going somewhere.”

Joe Navarro arrived in Miami from Cuba at the age of 8 and seized on the gestures of others to navigate new terrain. “It’s something every immigrant goes through,” he says. “In a restaurant, someone would cringe and I’d say, ‘Mom, we’re talking too loud.’ I picked up on things my parents and sisters would miss.”

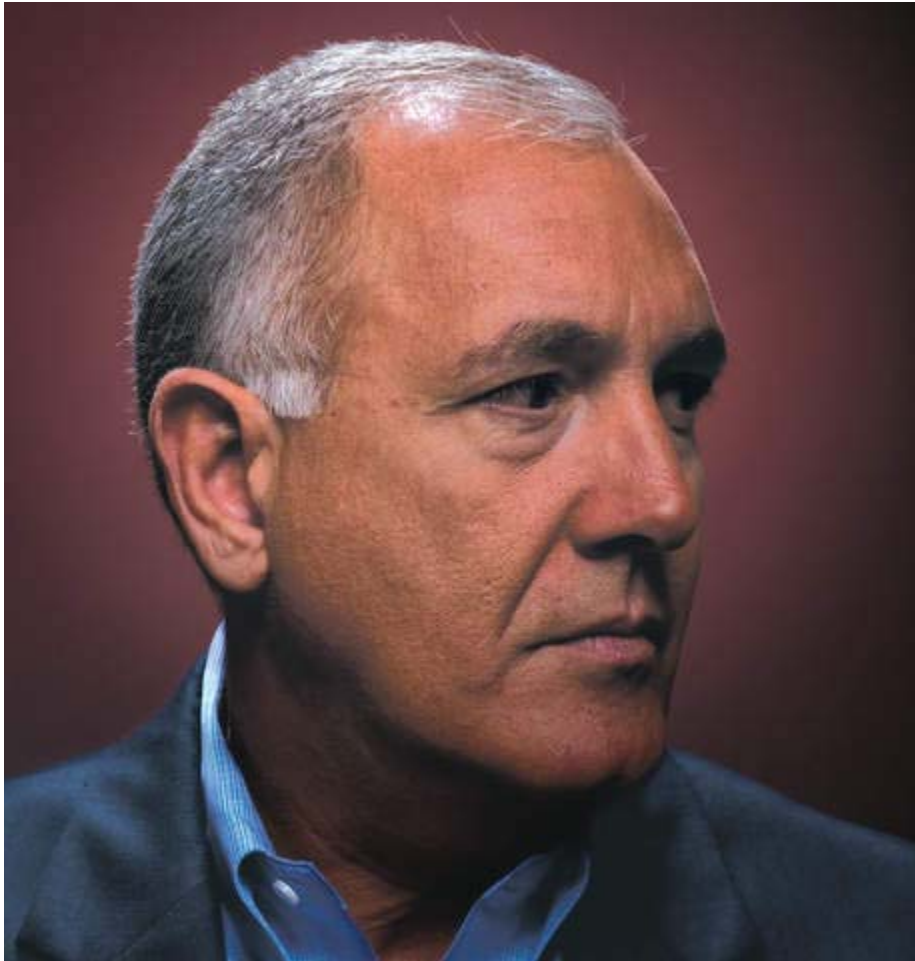
Jack Schafer was a back-talking Catholic schoolboy who used his frequent disciplinary hearings as an opportunity to deconstruct more than religious dogma—he scrutinized its human emissaries as well: “When teachers yelled at me, I was always studying them,” he recalls. Schafer pre-empted one lecture by telling a priest, “I’ve got to catch a bus, so here’s what you’re going to say: ‘You’re a young adult, you have to take responsibility, you have to be a team player, yadda yadda yadda.’ By the time I got home, he’d called my parents and told them I’d said word for word what he’d planned to tell me.” For this reason, says Schafer, “the priest recommended that I be exorcised.”

The ability to read others can be highly disconcerting, as the devilish young Schafer learned with his sass. It’s often better to play dumb, especially when trying to gauge how an individual behaves in a relaxed state. Investigators don’t want a suspect to think he has to “bring his A-game.” Frank calls it the *Columbo* Effect. Schafer deliberately mispronounces words to appear more accessible.

I’ve met Schafer only by phone, perhaps fitting in that Schafer himself believes words are of paramount importance. We’d spoken no more than five minutes when he correctly pegged my age and commiserated about the workload of an editor who also writes. “I’m not flattering you, I’m allowing you to flatter yourself!” he declared.

We’ve all had our emotional temperature taken, usually unknowingly. The customs official who asks whether you had a good flight is as cunning as she is courteous. The innocuous inquiry is likely to receive an honest answer, providing a baseline against which your response to more probing questions can be measured, should they be needed.

It is possible to obtain a baseline (and much more) simply by observing a person. This is where nonverbals—facial expressions and body language—come into play. A “torso lean” that distances a person from his or her interlocutor or a self-soothing touch to the forehead is easy to elicit and hard to hide. People can rehearse stories and control facial expressions, but the vast repertoire of gestures we all use is a rich source of revelation. Gestures are often deployed in moments of stress, making them all the more critical to grasp, because stressful reactions are worthy of further exploration.



Joe Navarro is attentive to the blunt signals transmitted by body language: "You can't ask a potential spy. 'Excuse me, are you collecting hostile intelligence?' You have to look at pace, at posture. Do they really have a destination or are they just ambling?"

As a newly minted FBI agent in Arizona, Navarro began tracking several men suspected of kidnapping a child whom they were holding for ransom. Navarro and his partners crisscrossed the town of Yuma tailing the men. The third time Navarro observed the suspects, he noted a change in their comportment. "Their shoulders were slumped and they were touching their faces," he recalls. It was enough to suggest that their scheme might be unraveling and they felt out of control. Hours later, the boy was thrown from their car as they attempted a getaway. (He survived.)

A baseline reading allows one to distinguish between a personal quirk (some people are jittery, even when relaxed) and a hot spot, a contradiction in behavior or demeanor—an utterance, expression, or gesture that doesn't compute. A person might shake their head

“no” while stating that they do, indeed, like someone. Hot spots are not so much goalposts that signal deception as signposts suggesting there’s more to the matter.

“If you judge a lie you could be wrong. If you judge a hot spot you’ll be right: ‘This person’s account is not consistent with how he or she normally displays information,’” says Frank.

A shrewd interrogator not only notices hot spots but also foments them. Commenting on the “lovely” family photos in the home of a man suspected of viewing child pornography could be a surefire trigger. You might spark enough tension in the suspect to provoke a pacifying gesture or two, perhaps a quick exhale or, if seated, a “leg cleanse,” rubbing the hands palms down on the thighs.

“I once found a fugitive in his mother’s house by simply watching her reaction to a question about his whereabouts,” recalls Navarro, whose own demeanor is calm and courteous. “Every time I asked whether her son might be in the home, she put her hand to her neck.” Touching or covering the suprasternal notch is a protective gesture that indicates discomfort, especially in women. (Men tend to stroke the neck, which may calm them by lowering the heart rate.) The woman’s hand trumped her consistent denials. Her son was found hiding in a closet.

Sometimes the tiniest shift from baseline opens vistas. Navarro was once tasked with debriefing a spy who refused to incriminate any coconspirators. At the suggestion of a fellow agent, he compiled a set of index cards, each with the name of a potential accomplice. The man was asked to flip through the deck and discuss each person.

At the sight of two names, the man’s pupils constricted and he squinted slightly. The response—a sign that he was bothered by the names—was enough to haul the men in for questioning. It turned out that they had been recruited to act as subagents by the spy in custody.

Microexpressions, gestures, and gaze are all critical cues to discomfort and deception. There’s one more key arena: the words themselves. Schafer sees in some words opportunities to omit facts (then, so, after, while) and hears qualifiers (most of the time) as channels for obfuscation. They’re verbal hot spots, clues that key information may have been elided.

Questioning a suspect who had told him, “Most of the time I go straight home,” Schafer would drill down by responding, “Let’s talk about a time you didn’t go straight home. You’re telling me there are times when you do things you don’t normally do. Could this be one of those times?”

When he instructs law enforcement agents, “I don’t teach people anything new,” Schafer insists. “I teach them to recognize the things they do all the time anyway.” Yet for Schafer, a fall from a horse in 1997 led to two years of rehabilitation in which he hardly comprehended words at all—he relearned vast swaths of nouns and grammar. After enduring a period during which words were no longer automatic, he became hyperaware of the import in the slimmest of qualifiers.

A good investigator tailors his or her approach to personality: A narcissist can be cajoled into self-incriminating statements through flattery—they'll surely want to share further triumphs. Ego is also the Achilles heel of a psychopath, with whom true rapport building is impossible. They can be goaded into confession by challenging their abilities: "Whoever did this must have been pretty stupid." They'll jump to set the record straight.

But the ace detective does more than simply parse and ply his target; he knows what's worth paying attention to, extracting salient nuggets from sparse details. He may view grainy surveillance footage and conclude from the tight cut of a suspect's skirt and hypersexual arc of her hip that she is a histrionic type. He may suggest that a suspect could be ensnared with a cash offer, because despite a high-paying job, he brown-bags his lunch every day. These are but two inductive leaps that later would prove correct.

When, by contrast, an investigator finds himself face to face with a barrage of signals, he processes some information automatically, thus freeing himself to think explicitly about other strands.

"It's like listening to an orchestra," says Frank. "The expert can tell when one section is off, which a novice might not see. They know base rates and the odds that someone will do X in Y situation." Given his firearms training, Newberry knew that Anita likely would have turned toward the sound of a gunshot, not away from it.

The speed-reading of multiple incoming channels—words, gestures, gaze, microexpressions—is what we call expert intuition. The more automatic it is, as it is for people we might label "signal savants," the harder it is to articulate.

Newberry's deception radar actually took a dive when Paul Ekman formally trained him in the use of microexpressions. He was, essentially, overthinking. Frank found that training people on the use of microexpressions for as little as 30 minutes, results in 80 percent of subjects improving, but the top 10 percent in fact perform no better. "J.J. is already running at a high level. You may not want to mess with that."

Clearly, though, the average person can improve tremendously. "The more that stuff becomes automatic, the more brain space you leave for evaluation; when you get the microexpression down, you have the ability to parse words," says Frank.

The fact that skilled agents are deployed on high-stakes cases may actually improve their hit rate because the greater the stakes in an interview, the more likely a suspect is to leak emotion, offering up the very clues that are so critical in making accurate judgments.

Ex-agents bet their retirement on the fact that all the techniques they employ are teachable. They give lectures on body language, reading emotions, and elicitation techniques at "non-disclosed" government training facilities. Newberry offers pricey seminars to civilians (lawyers prove especially interested and capable) via his Institute of Analytic Interviewing hosted at an après-ski paradise in June Lake, California.

Their skills don't always generalize beyond the professional field. Back at his ranch northwest of June Lake, amongst the horses and apple trees he keeps in part to "get away from people and all the problems of the world," Newberry applies some self-serving filters.

“I have a tendency to give people who are close to me the benefit of the doubt. If I didn’t turn it off I would probably have no friends.”

How To Get The Goods

You know the basics of building rapport. Here’s how to think about structuring your conversation and, if need be, turn up the heat.

- **Shut Up** “You’re in control when they’re talking, because you’re getting the information,” says J.J. Newberry. And don’t miss critical clues because you’re composing your next question. Sounds elemental? It’s the bane of law enforcement officers and journalists alike.
- **Set Up the Board Think Checkers:** Position and location matter. Women are most comfortable when seated directly across from an interlocutor. Men prefer to be at an angle relative to an interviewer. If your interviewee appears anxious, linger outside the room where you are scheduled to converse. A person may offer information just to avoid entering the room itself. Navarro calls this a “door jamb” confession. And a person exiting a room may feel guilty about wasting your time and concede a few unexpected morsels.
- **Change Perspective** People gear up for a verbal altercation. Have someone draw or act out an event—these actions can bring inconsistencies to light.
- **Get the Story Backwards** Reversing chronology forces a “frame by frame” recollection, rather than a reliance on knowledge of how events usually transpire. Reverse recall can trip up a liar and unearth forgotten or dormant information.

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