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Fib expert tells the truth about "Lie to Me"

Seth Rosenfeld, Special to The Chronicle

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J.J. Newberry chuckles when he watches "Lie to Me," the Fox television series about scientists who help cops catch crooks with their extraordinary ability to detect lies by analyzing facial expressions and body language.

Starring Tim Roth as Dr. Cal Lightman - a character inspired by the work of San Francisco scientist Paul Ekman, - the highly rated series is set to premiere its second season at 9 p.m. Monday, appearing on KTVU in the coveted slot after the network's smash hit "House."

"If you shrug your shoulder, rotate your hand or even just slightly raise your lower lip, Lightman will spot the lie," says the show's Web site.

"It's not so easy in real life," said Newberry, a former agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives who has helped crack some of the Bay Area's most notorious criminal cases and is considered one of the nation's foremost deception detectors.

Newberry runs the Institute of Analytic Interviewing, which has trained several thousand law enforcement officials at agencies ranging from the San Francisco Police Department to the CIA and Scotland Yard in the craft of questioning people.

The dramatic series has been hailed as educating the public about nonverbal communication and the latest police methods. It has even sparked law enforcement interest in interviewing techniques, but Newberry and other experts say "Lie to Me" presents a deceptively simple view of police interviews.

S.f. researchers

The show's characters are based loosely on a group of groundbreaking San Francisco researchers:

Lightman is Ekman, a professor emeritus at UCSF renowned for his findings that humans exhibit universal, involuntary micro-expressions that flash across the face in a split second, revealing hidden emotions. Lightman's partner, psychologist Gillian Foster, is Maureen O'Sullivan, the UCSF University of San Francisco psychologist who worked with Ekman. Eli Loker, Lightman's lead researcher, is Mark Frank, who was Ekman's student and is now director of the Communication Science Center at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Identifying liars

On the show, Lightman is always squinting hard into suspect's faces as he flings tough questions at them. In real life, Ekman has a firm that consults with government agencies and trains them on micro-expressions. But he acknowledges never having interviewed a suspect in a criminal investigation.

That job falls to investigators like Newberry, who as a federal agent built a remarkable record of persuading reluctant witnesses and suspects to talk in arson, gun and bombing cases involving the Black Panthers, the Symbionese Liberation Army and Oakland drug kingpin "One Eye" Marvin Johnson.

Several years ago, Newberry read about Ekman's work and contacted him. Ekman and O'Sullivan tested his ability to identify liars in videotaped interviews, and while most people tested correctly identified half, Newberry identified nearly all of them.

'Wizards' read faces

It turned out Newberry excelled at visually scanning a person and picking up clues to their emotional reactions to questions, said O'Sullivan, who is researching a book on people with this ability, whom she calls "wizards."

In 1998 Newberry, along with retired Oakland Police Department homicide Detective Dan Voznik and private investigator Carol Stubbs, formed the interviewing institute and incorporated into their training some of Ekman's findings on micro-expressions

These involuntary movements of facial muscles can provide valuable clues to emotions like fear, anger or sorrow, experts said, and can serve as "hot spots" that lead keen interviewers to potentially fruitful areas of questioning.

No 'pinocchio effect'

But Newberry said micro-expressions are a small part of an investigative interview. And as Frank and O'Sullivan noted, not everyone displays them. When micro-expressions do appear, they may indicate emotions unrelated to any crime, they said.

In short, face-reading alone is no basis for determining whether someone is lying. "There is no 'Pinocchio effect,'" Frank said.

On television, Lightman makes hard judgments after brief interviews. In reality, investigative interviews are highly structured and may take much longer.

According to Newberry, investigators first try to establish rapport with the witness or suspect, and

then ask a series of innocuous questions to determine how they respond when not under stress. This gives a "baseline" for comparing reactions to the harder questions that follow.

Show takes liberties

The results are often more ambiguous than on television, the experts said, and require more of the stuff that criminal cases really depend on: thorough investigation to gather evidence.

Ekman, who is employed as a scientific adviser to the show, said the series gets most of the science of micro-expressions right but agreed that it oversimplifies their use. In a blog on Fox's Web site, he corrects the show's errors and discusses the complexities.

"They do take some liberties," Ekman said. "This is entertainment."

E-mail Seth Rosenfeld at datebookletters@sfchronicle.com. This article has been corrected since it appeared in print editions.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/09/26/DDCP19KMCI.DTL>

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