

The Control Question: A Technique for Effective Introduction

Stanley Abrams

One of the major contributions to polygraph in the last fifty years has been John Reid's control questions. He indicated that his motivation for developing this procedure was to reduce the number of inconclusive charts and to apply some form of measuring system that he felt was not available in the relevant-irrelevant technique (Reid, 1975). In 1947 when Reid published the first paper on this approach he emphasized that "The examiner must also convey the impression in his pre-test interview with the subject that the 'comparative response' questions are of real significance and importance." He reinforced this concept later when he wrote, "If the subject receives the impression that the question is inconsequential and unimportant, the whole purpose of the control will be lost" (Reid, 1966). From Reid's statements, it is quite apparent that the value of a relevant question is almost completely dependent upon its control.

Backster (1969) refined the control question and explained its foundation in terms of the principle of psychological set. An individual directs his attention to that aspect of the environment which presents the greatest threat to his well being. The difficulty in applying this definition to the control question, in contrast to the relevant question, is that in the case of the former, this is only an assumed threat. It is assumed, rather than real, because the polygraphist does not inform the examinee of any of the consequences that might result from a lie on the control question being detected. The assumption has been that the unspecified threat associated with deception to the control question has greater threat value for the "innocent" subject than the relevant question whether this is true for all individuals, and if it is not, then some non-deceptive subjects will be diagnosed as deceptive.

Backster, while he uses a numerical score of minus nine or more on two charts to

indicate deception and plus nine or more to show truthfulness, does feel that there is justification for reducing the cut-off point on the non-deceptive side (personal communication with author). This suggests that greater sympathetic arousal occurs when a guilty subject lies to a relevant question than when an innocent person responds deceptively to a control. It would appear then that lying to a control question does not have a much threat value as exists in lying to a relevant question. In order to achieve a greater validity, it is felt to be necessary to increase the threat of the control question. To accomplish this, a somewhat different approach was employed in developing a series of control questions with forty suspects who had had criminal charges brought against them.

Each subject was informed that he would be asked a series of questions unrelated to the charges against him, but which would serve to give the examiner some insight into his character and moral standards. This appeared to reduce the examinee's tendency to admit to the activities of which he was questioned so that control questions were more readily obtained. After the controls were selected, the subject was again asked if he were certain of his answers. When he assured the examiner of this, he placed himself in the positions of finding it more difficult to retract his statements later. The subject was then very clearly told that his truthfulness regarding these statements was every bit as important as was his responding honestly to the crime questions. Any decision made, relating to his truthfulness on the crime question, he was informed, was based on his truthfulness to the controls as well. The subject was led to believe that the controls were as meaningful as the relevant questions and that his final diagnosis would be dependent on his honest response to both the control and relevant questions.

This served to spell out what had only been assumed in the past, that the control questions were real threats to the innocent. Utilized in this manner, the innocent subject's attention was diverted to the controls because he believed that if his deception to this item were detected, it could result in his being labeled "guilty."

After applying this approach in forty examinations, the following observations were made:

1. The number of inconclusives and difficult to score charts was reduced because non-deceptive subjects demonstrated much greater reactions to the control questions.
2. The employment of this procedure did not appear to negatively influence the deceptive subjects' reaction to the relevant questions.
3. Explaining the use of the control question technique to attorneys and courts when it was employed in this manner was much more meaningful to them. They were better able to comprehend the concept of psychological set and could more readily understand the threat inherent in the control question.
4. While it could not be demonstrated statistically, it was felt that a higher degree of validity was achieved in that

this approach reduced the likelihood of misdiagnosing a non-deceptive subject.

5. The threat associated with the control and relevant questions appeared to be much more equivalent. For the innocent, the relevant question was always a threat, but now the control was even more threatening. He clearly had been informed that a decision related to the charges against him would be determined by his truthfulness to the control questions as well as the relevant.

The threat to the innocent was not related to the content of the control question, stealing, rape, etc, but rather to the fear of being caught lying. The implication of this is that the examiner does not have to be overly concerned as to the content of the controls for even lying about a very minor issue should induce a considerable sympathetic arousal. Again, this is because the subject has been informed that a judgment of his "guilt" or "innocence" will be based on his truthfulness to the controls. The threat has been spelled out.

The guilty continued to perceive the relevant questions as presenting the greatest threat to their well-being while the innocent were alerted to the controls. In Backster's terms, it cause an "either/or" situation rather than one that could be characterized as "more or less."

References

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