

SMU professor researches the telltale signs of lying

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Published March 1, 2018 - 8:41pm

Study to help train lawyers



Meg Ternes, an assistant professor of psychology at Saint Mary's University, says her study on lying will focus on the legal system.

A researcher at Saint Mary's University is hoping her work can help people better tell when someone is lying, and what signs are indicators of someone's credibility.

Meg Ternes, an assistant professor in the department of psychology, said while studies have looked at the issue in the area of simple truths, she wants to focus on the legal system.

"It's looking at their face, their verbal behaviour and their non-verbal behaviour," Ternes said Thursday.

She said the cues that someone is lying have been inconsistent, especially for non-verbal behaviour.

"One person might fidget more when they lie, another might fidget less when they lie, so you're looking for the change from their normal behaviour."

She said the study will be helpful to train lawyers in the techniques of picking up on signs that someone is lying.

"They don't have access to a polygraph, but they do have access to someone in front of them or a transcript of an interview."

She said her study is looking at facial, verbal and non-verbal cues together.

"That work is really preliminary; most people look at them separately," she said.

She said her area of interest is forensic psychology, so her work is targeted at helping in the justice system.

"Most lies that we tell don't matter that much, they're little white lies," she said. "But in the criminal justice system, lies matter a lot.

She said when it comes to the system, "you can see that there's a clear motivation to lie, and that's where lies can really matter."

She hopes her work can improve the ability to tell when someone is lying, "especially in a high-stakes situation."

That can include people lying about their lack of involvement in a crime or the level of involvement of someone else, Ternes said.

Her hope is that her work can be useful and relevant to the justice system.

Ternes is presenting her work Friday afternoon at the Saint Mary's research expo, along with other researchers from the university

More information can be found at www.smu.ca/research/research-expo.html (<http://www.smu.ca/research/research-expo.html>).

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