The Journal of Credibility Assessment and Witness Psychology
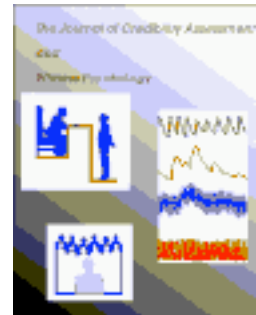
Polygraph Screening

Donald J. Krapohl

**Department of Defense Polygraph Institute,
Ft. Jackson, South Carolina**

Polygraph Screening

Central Issues

1) To predict future actions based on recent and not-recent behaviors
2) To identify those behaviors that are predictive of future actions
3) To uncover the behaviors of interest as accurately as possible
4) To develop optimal decision rules
5) Minimize false negatives for the most serious threats

Role of the Polygraph in National Security

- Primarily: Provide decision-makers with information regarding past and current activities of those who seek security clearances or special accesses
- Reporting criteria established by Congress, policy makers, and agency adjudicators.
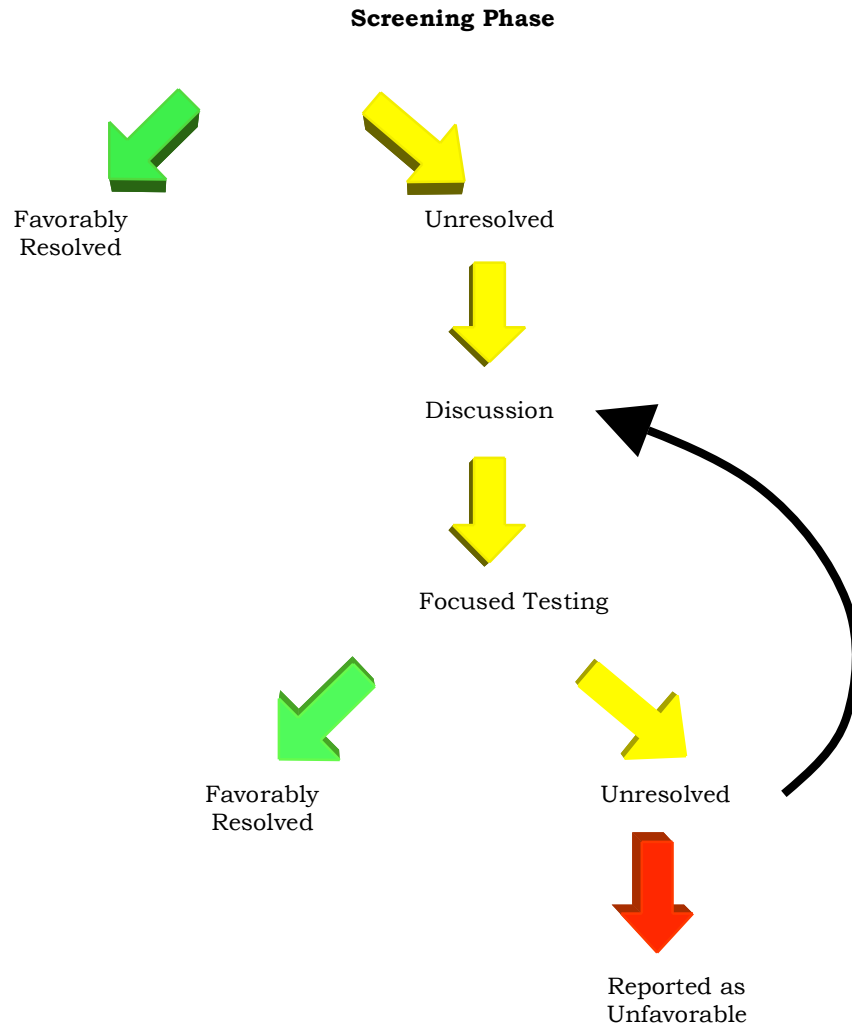- Secondary: Deter poor security risks from entering the system

Polygraph Products

- Self-reporting from examinees who volunteer information before the testing
- Self-reporting from examinees after testing
- Polygraph results

What Polygraph Screening is Not

- A single step
- A single technique
- Inclined toward false positive errors
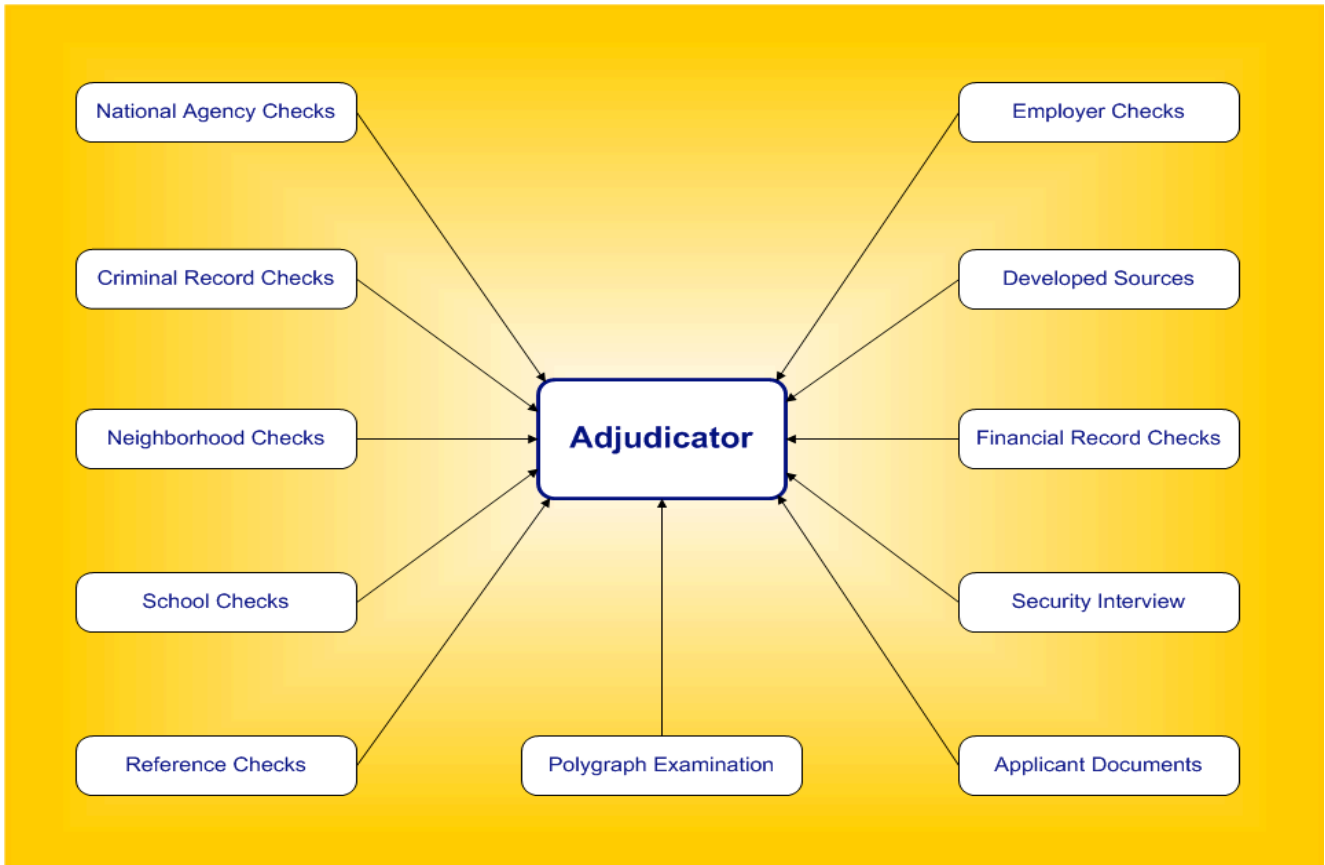- Final arbiter of employment fate

Important Factors

- Polygraph reactions trigger focused attention.
- Unfavorable polygraph results usually prompt other investigative methods.
- Polygraph screening in the Government uses several techniques, each with different strengths and weaknesses.

Screening Phase

Favorably
Resolved

Unresolved

Discussion

Focused Testing

Favorably
Resolved

Unresolved

Reported as
Unfavorable

Important Factors

- Error rates have not been conclusively established.
  - Accuracy may be affected by
    - base rates
    - test questions (number, time span, memory limits)
    - decision rules
    - post-screening testing
- Field validation of polygraph screening has proved difficult, and will be no less difficult for the replacement technologies.

Components to Security Decisions

National Agency Checks

Criminal Record Checks

Neighborhood Checks

School Checks

Reference Checks

Adjudicator

Employer Checks

Developed Sources

Financial Record Checks

Security Interview

Applicant Documents

Polygraph Examination

Principal Counterintelligence Issues

- Espionage against the US
- Sabotage
- Disclosures of classified information to unauthorized persons

Secondary Issues

- Security violations
  - Unreported contact with foreign nationals
  - Unauthorized transportation of classified material
  - Unauthorized storage of classified material
  - Computer system misuse

Suitability Issues

- Serious criminal activities
- Excessive drug use
- Falsification of applicant documents

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