In this article, Jerry Lewis and Michelle Cuppari give a brief overview on the polygraph, its history, and potential predecessors, while also seeking to make clear the difference between the polygraph and a lie detector. The title of the article itself, “The polygraph: The truth lies within,” along with accounts of the polygraph being used to convict innocent people lends itself to an inherent skepticism of the polygraph. However, near the end of the article the authors adopt a friendlier tone to the device when its results are not taken as total fact.

The skeptical tone of the article begins when the authors describe the predecessors to the lie detector, as the polygraph is, in their opinion, regrettable called. The first example they give comes from the Bedouins of Arabia in 300 B.C. The Bedouins used to force suspects to lick a hot iron, and if the tongue was not burned, the person was declared as having told the truth. In a similar, albeit less harsh method, the ancient Chinese had suspects put rice powder in their mouths. If the powder came out most, the person was telling the truth; if not, the person was lying. Both of these tests were conducted due to the belief that those lying will have less saliva being produced and thus a dryer mouth. These examples seem designed to make the reader skeptical of associating certain physiological processes to the act of lying.

The article then goes on to describe the two main types of polygraph test: Control Questions Test (CQT) and Guilty Knowledge Test (GKT). The CQT asks two types of questions, control and relevant. Control questions are related to the investigation, but not specific to the crime, and are designed to illicit an emotional response to gauge the interviewee’s reactions. Relevant questions ask detailed questions related to the investigation, and the reactions between the two are compared. GKT tests focus on the crime and ask the interviewee questions answers that only the investigators and the criminal would know, because other than the investigators, only the criminal would know the actual details and have a response. Although GKT tests have been found to be more accurate, they are less widely used due to the difficulty in knowing for sure what details have been kept from the public.

The authors then bring further skepticism in the process by describing the pre-test process. They acknowledge that innocent people may be nervous for being found guilty and guilty people may be calm for certainty of knowing they can pass this and be declared innocent. To combat this, they say law enforcement agencies generally conduct a pre-test of simple questions designed to show the interviewee that the polygraph actually does work. Generally the innocent will relax more while the guilty will get more nervous, but as they mention, this is not always the case. They then mention the ‘Green River Killer’ case in 1982 where polygraph results were used to send an innocent man to jail while allowing the killer to be free for 20 years and the murders went on. It took DNA evidence to exonerate the falsely charged man.

Lewis and Cuppari then rather bluntly declare that the polygraph measures just the physiological processes associated with the machine, not necessarily the truth of what the interviewee is said. They do, however, go on to say that when an experienced interviewer is conducting the polygraph, the results can be useful in telling which people are certainly innocent and allow investigators to focus on a smaller group of people as
potential suspects. An experienced polygraph interviewer to them is someone who does not seek to find
guilt in everyone but seeks to find the objective truth in each case.

The biggest takeaway from this article is that it appears Jerry Lewis and Michelle Cuppari at least
attempted to be objective in their analysis of the polygraph. However, the article was laced with skeptical
overtones. It is hard to determine, though, whether this comes from any potential bias beforehand or that
if the more one researches the polygraph, the more skeptical one becomes to the device as an accurate lie
detector.