There are marked differences in usage of polygraphy between various countries. Many of these differences are of limited interest, because polygraphy requires a certain level of technical development and resources to support the reliable measurement of physiological changes, and many underdeveloped countries do not have the necessary resources. In addition, countries that do not strongly protect individual rights are not likely to use polygraphy, because other third-degree methods are available, and the question of guilt vs. innocence can be decided on the political grounds of what is in the best interests of the state.

This still leaves the set of technologically advanced democracies, and within this group of countries there remain considerable differences in the extent and sort of polygraph usages. The similarities in technical development and political systems render these usage differences of considerable interest, because they suggest the operation of cultural factors on a procedure which, purportedly, is a scientifically based technology that should be independent of such cultural influences.

In this chapter, we shall consider these marked contrasts between developed democratic countries, and we shall offer some sociological hypotheses (of a necessarily speculative sort) to account for these contrasts. We restrict our attention to only four contrasts, because our purpose is not to present a complete survey of usages (any such survey, in any case, would be dated by the time this book is published¹), but rather to illustrate how powerful cultural factors can be, and to begin the task of attempting to understand these factors. The contrasts are discussed relative to the modern polygraph’s place of origin and of widest current use: the U.S.

¹For additional information on specific countries’ polygraphic practices, as they were a few years before the publication of each paper, there are a number of sources. For Israel, see Harnon (1982); for the U.K., see Gale (1987, p. 1); for Canada, see Furedy (1989).
7. International Usage Contrasts

The United States Versus Continental Western Europe

As we have already seen, polygraphy in the U.S., though controversial, is quite seriously considered as at least a potentially scientifically accurate way of detecting deception, when in the hands of qualified professionals. Accordingly, there are many states in which polygraphic evidence is admissible in criminal courts of law, although in most of the states consent of either the prosecution or the defense, or both, is required (i.e., “stipulated” admission). This means, of course, that the examiner can be either “hostile” (e.g., police polygrapher) or “friendly” (e.g., hired by the defense), so there is plenty of scope for polygraphic examinations to occur.

It is also worth noting that even the recent legislation (Employee Polygraph Protection Act, 1988) passed to outlaw polygraphy’s industrial use is not as restrictive as it may appear. Its use is permitted in those industrial contexts where employees are suspected of a crime, so the event-related version (i.e., the CQT) has had its credibility bolstered by this legislation. Also, event-free usage of polygraphy continues in security (broadly defined) organizations. Finally, as is evident from American newspaper headlines, in more general societal conflicts involving the truth (e.g., salaries offered to leading sports figures), one or both sides in a conflict will offer to subject their credibility to the polygraph. Like the duel in earlier times, the polygraph is therefore viewed as the arbiter of truth, but with science rather than divinity as the basis of that arbitration.

Countries like Holland and West Germany in continental Western Europe are currently as active and well-developed in the science of psychophysiology as the U.S. Yet there is no evident research interest in the psychophysiological detection of deception, and academics appear to be totally uninterested in the topic. Polygraphy’s criminal use has been specifically outlawed in several of these countries such as West Germany. In West Germany, first the Bundesgerichtshof (1950), which is the supreme court, and later the Bundesverfassungsgericht (1981), which is another supreme court that has constitutional rights as a special concern, ruled against polygraphy’s criminal use. Moreover, presumably on the basis of these judgments, there is also no industrial polygraphy in West Germany (Boucssein, 1989, personal communication). In these countries, then, the North American event-related CQT is practically unused by either forensic authorities or security organizations. Similarly, the polygraph is not used in civil disputes as a scientific arbiter.

One of us (JJF) has found that lectures on the polygraph draw larger American and Canadian audiences than any other topic in psychophysiology (e.g., conditioning, orienting, cognitive stress), whereas in Holland, West Germany, Norway, and Sweden the suggestion to talk about polygraphy has uniformly been rejected in favor of other psychophysiological topics.