A study on smuggling has disproved the myth that it is easy to spot smugglers by their evasion nonverbal behaviour. A disappointing finding? Not at all says Samantha Mann, who describes how her research can help make law enforcement strategies more effective, and also shape future efforts to find out what techniques may be useful.

Popular films and behind-the-scenes television shows would lead us to believe that smugglers leak signs of nervousness, in much the same way that those same sources portray the behaviour of liars in general. Smuggling, after all, is just a specific form of deceit. Instead they have turned nonverbal behaviour in order to detect the smuggler is an important one to solve. However, such studies do exist and corroborate the findings of laboratory studies. Hence, deception researchers have largely moved on from examining nonverbal behaviour in order to detect deceit. Instead they have turned their attention to verbal differences, or developing techniques, such as manipulating the interview, in order to distinguish liars from truth tellers.

The problem with detecting a smuggler is that there is only non-verbal behaviour to go on. This is true of any person with malicious intent among a crowd of people. Thus, as recent events have demonstrated, the problem of detecting the smuggler is an important one to solve.

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THE NEXT STEP IN DETECTING SMUGGLERS

As anticipated, participants varied wildly in their behaviour and tactics when smuggling. Whilst it is true that the participants in this study were probably not practiced in the art of smuggling, based on deception research, we assume that this reflects real life where some may exhibit detectable nervous behaviour and many will not. Hence the most effective solution, as in other realms of deception research, is to devise an easily implementable technique to distinguish between smugglers and innocents. For example, by having ‘agents’ approach and stand uncomfortably close to the participant and appear to detect them, but without saying as much, to see if doing so prompts a different reaction in smugglers to those who are not smuggling. This is what we are currently investigating.

Dr Samantha Mann is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Portsmouth. This study was funded by CREST.