Police test may expose false rape claims

Sarah Hall

Police are developing a “lie detector” test to help them to root out false rape allegations, it emerged yesterday.

A checklist of 15 features found in the statements of genuine rape victims is being fine-tuned by a Midlands police force as a means of assessing the credibility of alleged victims, and it could be adopted by forces elsewhere.

The technique — described as “deeply worrying” by women’s groups who fear that it presumes the victim is lying — was unveiled at the British Psychological Society’s forensic psychology conference in Birmingham. It draws on well-established German techniques for assessing whether children’s sex abuse claims are genuine.

The so-called statement validity analysis works on the principle that accounts based on real experiences differ from those that are fabricated. By rooting out those differences, it is possible to get a strong indication of whether someone is lying.

The main differences, according to Detective Sergeant Chris Few, who compiled the “test” as part of his psychology MA at Leicester University, include the amount of detail given by alleged victims, and their willingness, or not, to blame themselves for the crime.

Those who are lying will give a bare account, so they can remember their story better, whereas those telling the truth will include superfluous detail.

Genuine victims will see nothing wrong in admitting they cannot remember everything, and will talk about their emotions at the time and the attacker’s motive. Fabricators will try to make their account watertight and will not countenance feeling blame.

Women who have been raped will tend to give fairly clear descriptions of conversations, and put the rape in the context of their lives, whereas fabricators will confine themselves to describing the one event.

With research suggesting that 10%-41% of rape allegations are made up, Mr Few tested his technique by training 16 officers and asking them to assess four out of eight statements — half of which he was “100% satisfied” were genuine, and half of which were later exposed as fabricated. The officers made the correct assessments in 72% of cases, but 16 untrained officers had only a 50% success rate.

While admitting that it could not be used in court, Mr Few said: “It’s a useful investigative tool, one of many.”

But Julie Bindell, of Justice for Women, said: “This will no doubt form and endorse a stereotype that women make false allegations of rape, and that you can test whether a woman is telling the truth by her response to questions.

“We have a 6% conviction rate for rape, which either means 94% of women are lying or there are an awful lot of men getting off. I’d like to see a bit more attention paid to how we can test whether those men in the dock are telling the truth.”

Mr Few denied that the test was based on the assumption that women were lying. “I would like to think that if it is widely used it will support as many unbelieved genuine victims as expose the others.”