

Nobody Knows What a Fraudster Is

The way we think about the central aspects of an investigation — the judgments that most shape whether it succeeds — operates mostly beneath our awareness, yet these are the very things that most determine the outcome. This talk examines that hidden layer: how fraud professionals actually use the core tools of the field, and what research reveals about a gap few have noticed — what we are really seeing when we use them, and how much of the interpretation forms below conscious thought. After three decades of expanding credentials, standards, and technology, the field's own estimate of revenue lost to fraud has barely moved while practitioners report that risk keeps rising. The factor examined least is the mind doing the investigating, which shapes a case more than any framework.

For decades the science of fraud has aimed at the perpetrator's mind. This talk turns it toward the investigator's. Drawing on cognitive science and my own experimental research, it examines how investigators actually think — how attention, certainty, and interpretation operate below awareness as a case unfolds — and shows that turning a deliberate, skeptical focus onto our own reasoning produces measurably better outcomes than directing it outward alone. We cannot change what we cannot see.

Major Subjects

The Word We Never Defined

Examining what the term “fraudster” actually means, and why it matters.

The Private Interpretation

What we actually see when we read a red flag or work a risk checklist — and how a risk-assessment step can quietly lower skepticism rather than raise it, the reverse of what it was meant to do.

Certainty Without Accuracy

Why confidence tends to climb as a problem hardens and as we close the search early, why introspection is a poor record of our own reasoning, and how the bias blind spot keeps both hidden from us.

What You See Is What You Set

How attention is configured by what we are looking for, so the framework in hand decides what registers and what never does — including evidence sitting in plain sight.

The Grip of the First Answer

How a familiar framework like the fraud triangle hands us a first reading that then captures our attention — functional fixedness and the Einstellung effect, where a good answer blocks a better one while we believe we are still searching.

The Profile That Captured an Investigation

The Richard Jewell case and the research behind it — the homology assumption and the profiling illusion — and how a confident portrait of “the kind of person” can seize an inquiry and delay the truth.

The Inward Turn

Redirecting skepticism from the suspect to one’s own reasoning, and the experimental finding that a brief metacognitive shift sharpened expert judgment where added skepticism did not — with where to begin.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this talk, participants will be able to:

1. Distinguish a claim about a fraudulent act from a judgment about a person, and explain how that distinction shapes the course of an investigation.
2. Describe how common fraud frameworks direct attention and can raise or lower skepticism in ways practitioners do not notice.
3. Identify the cognitive forces that operate below awareness during fraud examination — overconfidence, attentional narrowing, functional fixedness, and the limits of introspection.
4. Recognize, through the Richard Jewell case and supporting research, how a confident profile of a person can capture an investigation and delay the truth.
5. Apply a metacognitive approach, supported by experimental research with investigators and auditors, to surface and examine one’s own reasoning while a case is underway.

Program Details

Program Level: Advanced

Prerequisites: 5 or more year’s experience in fraud investigation

Advanced Preparation: None

Available Lengths: 1, 2, 3, or 4 hours

Instructional Delivery Method: Group Live / Group Internet-Based

Designed For: Fraud examiners, investigators, internal and external auditors, forensic accountants, and compliance and ethics professionals.

Field of Study: Specialized Knowledge

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