

Exploring the Mind of a Spy

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Spies who betray their own country have long been perceived as a more unusual type of criminal than those typically involved in other kinds of crime. However, a new perspective may be considered. Treasonous spies do not merit special regard or a special classification. On the contrary, these individuals may be regarded as merely being another variety of white-collar criminals who became involved in matters of national security with possible international ramifications as well (Stone, 1989). Some theorize that, however serious the consequences of their acts, the behavior of spies who perform espionage against their own country may best be understood as having similar motivations to other greedy white-collar criminals. The public's perception has been that nearly all American spies who have been caught have been motivated by money. But, is this an accurate assumption?

In an article published in *The Boston Globe*, Adam Pertman explores "why they spy," and concludes that the common denominator today among "people who export their nation's secrets" is best described by a Hollywood screenwriter's line: "Show me the money" (Pertman, 2001). Others, such as FBI analysts, psychiatrists, and researchers, agree that rationales including disenchantment with specific government policies, feeling disgruntled with their own jobs, problems with self-esteem, living out fantasies of a more flamboyant lifestyle, and experiencing a loyalty conflict (cognitive dissonance) because of one's ancestry or religion may be among the array of reasons that prompt men and women to act out the betrayal.

"People usually spy for some combination of emotional gratification and remuneration," stated John Pike, the director of Global Security.org, a Washington, D.C.-based policy organization. "But, whatever their reason, in almost all cases today, money is how people keep score (as cited in Pertman, 2001)."

Scientific effort has been made to develop a two-factor theory or model for motivations that lead to traitorous spy behaviors. One researcher identified a bipolar effect with money (or greed) at one end and

ideology at the other (Stone, 2001). Discussions with past or present government-employed counterintelligence officials led him to conceptualize an additional orientation, that of being disaffected or dissatisfied with how one's self has been treated by others, including organizations or political entities. A continuum was created wherein "disaffected" was at one end, and the opposite end was labeled as "other," representing some kind of other orientation, meaning concern for the welfare of others. Stone (2001) suggests that either two-factor motivational theory, i.e., greed vs. ideology or disaffection vs. other may be a means to understand the motivation of treasonous spies. To test his theory, Stone assembled the research facts of 175 U.S. spies identified since the end of World War II. [Additional reports claim the number to be ranging from 98 (Gelles, 2006) to 150 (Edwards for Bradley on National Public Radio, 2001)], and was significantly able to place 153 U.S. spies on either of the bipolar dimensions (Stone, 2001).

Project Slammer

In 1985 (Pertman, 2001) U.S. intelligence agencies embarked on a 10-year benchmark study named Project Slammer (Security Educator's News, 2006), which was focused on interviewing 30 incarcerated spies. The purpose of the study was to determine the motivation of the convicted spies and to learn the methods by which they committed their crimes. Although dated, the previously classified study's findings remain significant, and the conclusions included the following:

- No offender entered a position of trust with the intent to betray.
- There were two prevalent personality traits:
 - a. highly manipulative, dominant, and self-serving
 - b. passive, easily influenced, and lacking self-esteem
- A large number were substance abusers.
- Their decisions to betray were based in part on their beliefs that their co-workers would not turn them in.
- They were male (Several women have committed espionage on the U.S., but

these statistics reflect only those spies interviewed as part of Project Slammer.)

- Marital status was irrelevant.
- Those interviewed were immature with an inability to cope.
- Interviewees had an anti-social personality.
- There were significant personality changes that started suddenly with behavior change throughout (Security Educator's News, 2006).

Pertman's (2001) analysis of the principle findings of the Slammer Study was that a particularly detailed traumatic event provided the impetus for an individual's eventual decision to cross the line. Additionally, although the 30 subjects of the study were initially terrified about being caught, their fear gave way to euphoria (Pertman). They felt no guilt about their betrayal while they were conducting the espionage or sometimes even after being arrested because they participated in self-deceptive rationalizations (Gelles, 2006, p. 4).

The U.S. government has extensively studied the behaviors associated with the risk of espionage. Project Slammer was an inter-agency project in which a team of federal agents, along with government psychologists and psychiatrists, interviewed the convicted spies, focusing on their motivations and the methods they used in their search to understand the behaviors, motivations, complete mindset, and personalities of spies. Security and counterintelligence professionals hoped to learn enough information to improve the early identification and treatment of employees at risk for committing serious offenses.

Personality Disorders

According to Gelles (2006), betraying one's country does not result from an isolated moment of uncontrollable insight. It results from a long process or emotional crisis. And, typically, the "at risk" behavior has not been observed or reported by a colleague or superior. Although spies who betray may not fit the current perception of crazy, they usually are emotionally disturbed and suffer from one or more personality disorders. The two most commonly experienced disorders are anti-social personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder.

Anti-Social Personality Disorder

Anti-social personality disorder is manifested in behaviors reflecting a tendency to reject the normal rules and standards of society. Individuals of this orientation experience a focus only on what they can get now with little interest in the future and no focus on learning from the past. They are not capable of forming deep friendships or deep attachments or of developing a commitment to anyone or anything. Their capability to remain loyal is severely compromised.

Most individuals with an anti-social personality disorder have criminal records that make them ineligible for security clearances, but many milder versions are eligible and do receive clearances. While on the job, they "press the limits of rules and regulations to see how much they can get away with and bend the law when it conveniently accommodates their self-interest" (First & Tasman, 2004, P. 1246–49). Professionally smooth and glib, the similarities to white-collar criminals are startling. They have the capability to be convincing and to talk their way out of trouble.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissistic personality disorder traits include unmerited feelings of self-importance or self-esteem (grandiosity), feeling entitled, and a general lack of empathy for others. Many successful individuals or over-achievers appear to be narcissistic. However, from the security perspective, a concern arises only when an individual's view of his or her own abilities is so distorted from reality that he or she becomes aligned with a destiny of disappointment rather than success (Gelles, 2006; First & Tasman, 2004).

When confronted by criticism or a failure, such individuals feel devalued by the individual or the organization and may react with a temper tantrum or, perhaps, extensive written appeals. A narcissistic's relationship with others may turn very quickly from love to hate or vice versa, depending upon whether the relationship supports or minimizes the individuals compelling need to validate one's grandiose self-image.

Narcissists who feel rejected and underappreciated by their organization or supervisor need to defend themselves against

strong feelings of inadequacy. Their responses may be passive aggressive, vindictive, or generally rebellious. To balance the devaluations, they might turn to a foreign intelligence service to satisfy their emotional needs, finding enormous satisfaction in working as a spy and outsmarting the organization that rejected him or her (Gelles, 2006).

Three Critical Factors and Traits Lead to Treasonous Betrayal

Anti-social behaviors and strong narcissistic tendencies are frequently associated with increased security risks, but these tendencies need not lead to a more serious offense. Gelles (2006) cites three critical factors that necessarily must be in position in order for a trustworthy and loyal government employee to cross the line and participate in the activities of a spy.

First, there must be a personality or character weakness, such as anti-social tendencies or narcissism, that causes a predisposition to maladjusted counterproductive behavior. Second, a personal, financial, or career crisis puts an individual with these weaknesses under great stress, triggering more obvious counterproductive behavior often observed by friends, co-workers, or a supervisor. Third, the friends, co-workers, and supervisor fail to recognize the signs of a serious problem, and they decide they don't want to get involved or assume that someone else will take care of it. As a result, no one intervenes to help resolve the problem, and the individual's behavior spirals out of control. Finally, most spies have an inability to accept responsibility for their own actions. Mistakes are minimized or ignored, and they blame others for their problems (Gelles, 2006).

It is essential to screen recruits and potential employees for their ability to accept criticism without defensiveness, to express anger and frustration appropriately, to feel compassion and consideration toward others, to respect the rights of others, to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others to achieve a common goal, to sustain a strong social support system, to exhibit self-discipline in delaying gratification in order to achieve a long-term goal, and to honor

commitments and recognize that they are not entitled or owed anything from life (Gelles, 2006).

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About the Author

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