

A Guide to the Psychology of Espionage

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Introduction

People are fascinated by espionage. The sheer volume of fiction and non-fiction books and movies dedicated to the subject of spying attests to this, as well as private citizens' enthusiasm for news reports on cases of espionage and their thirst for mere fragments of insight into those engaged in it. This is probably in no small part due to the fact that so much of what we consider espionage occurs in a world inaccessible to most people.

Even for those who have years of service in the intelligence community, however, one question remains difficult to fully explain: Why spy? History shows that most countries have at one time or another made the decision to seek out secret information regarding other countries, groups, or even their own people through clandestine means...that is, to spy. Still, except for irrational behavior on the part of unaccountable dictators, the decision to spy is usually based on the consensus of a country's political leadership regarding national security goals and how to achieve them. This consensus decision may be complex but still more or less discernable to outsiders.

What is much more difficult to understand is why a particular individual would chose to engage in espionage. The psychology of espionage covers a number of areas and includes questions such as: Why does a particular individual choose a career in intelligence? What is the psychological profile of the clandestine officer who chooses a career spent largely in the shadows? How do individual psychological factors impact the collection and, especially, the analysis of intelligence?

Perhaps the most intriguing question is why a person who has been placed in a position of trust would then betray that trust and engage in espionage? Why harm his or her country or group? Why expose one's family to scandal...or worse? This is the issue of the so-called "insider spy."

Definitions

For the purpose of this discussion, **espionage** will be defined in accordance with *U.S. Code Title 18 (Crimes and Criminal Procedure), Part I (Crimes), Chapter 37 (Espionage and Censorship)*,

§ 798 (*Disclosure of classified information*)¹ as knowingly and willfully communicating, furnishing, transmitting or otherwise making any classified information available to an unauthorized person, or publishing, or using it in any manner prejudicial to the safety or interest of the United States or for the benefit of any foreign government to the detriment of the United States. This definition does not include classified intelligence collected on behalf of the United States and in accordance with U.S. law.

The word **spy** will refer to the “insider spy,” that is, the individual who has been formally vetted, has obtained appropriate security clearances, is placed in a position of trust where he or she has access to classified information, and then chooses to betray that trust by committing espionage against the country or organization they serve. He or she may be a contractor or full-time employee of that organization. This is distinct from the person with whom the spy collaborates, traditionally a member of a foreign intelligence service, who serves as the spy’s **handler**.

Why Spy?

Before the rise of the field of psychology in the late 19th century, human behavior was often explained based on moralistic or religious beliefs. Apart from the ancients (Hippocrates concluded that mental disorders arose from physical problems rather than demonic possession and Galen concluded that the brain and nervous system played a central role in thought and emotion),² the explanation for offensive or illegal behaviors, such as espionage, was often a moral judgment based on religious or social proscriptions rather than psychological motivation.

Moralistic approaches were based on what we might consider a black and white, good versus evil world view that portrayed transgressors as subject to external, often metaphysical influences that either destined them to be immoral or had the power to override their ability to control their own behavior. This remains an important point because, despite research demonstrating the complexity of individual motivation and behavior, this ostensibly common-sense view still influences our perception of those who commit espionage: the spy who is working for our side is “good”, while the one working against us is “bad.”

While a simple and emotionally satisfying explanation, viewing espionage in moralistic terms does little toward gaining the sort of insight that would assist in developing methods for prevention or early identification. An organization does not knowingly hire a traitor. Rather, on rare occasion an organization hires someone it believes it can trust who either successfully hides his or her intention to commit espionage or, more commonly, later finds themselves in circumstances that (for any number of complex personal reasons) present espionage as a reasonable, even attractive choice.³ Like espionage itself, psychology presents us with a world

¹ Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute website (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/798>)

² T.L. Brink. (2008) *Psychology: A Student Friendly Approach*. "Unit One: The Definition and History of Psychology."

³ Herbig, K. & Wiskoff, M. (2002) *Espionage against the United States by American Citizens. 1947-2001* Monterey CA: *Defense Personnel Security Research Center*.

where the certainties of black and white, moralistic approaches succumb to the reality of psychological nuance and complexity.

Of MICE and (Mostly) Men

In modern times, governments have instituted efforts to understand the psychological and social (psychosocial) factors that contribute to an individual's decision to spy. Initially, at least in the United States, conventional wisdom played a larger role than actual research.

Perhaps the most oft-cited explanation for espionage is the revealed knowledge known by the acronym MICE, as well as its many subsequent variations. While MICE presents a more or less common-sense view of general motivation that was likely popular before being presented to the public in print, it appears to have first been posited in a book by former KGB Major Stanislav Levchenko. After defecting to the United States in 1979, Levchenko wrote a memoir⁴ in which he suggested there were four general motives for espionage: Money, Ideology, Compromise/Coercion, and Ego.

Money – This is a general category that would include such selfish motivation as avarice (extreme greed for wealth or material gain) as well as what might be considered more noble motives such as the need to pay for a family member's medical treatment or a child's education. In any event, the spy comes to the personal conclusion that espionage is the best or perhaps only means of obtaining the money desired. CIA research psychologist Terry Thompson suggests there are a number of additional factors that may contribute to the spy's vulnerability to the offer of money, to include a cultural tendency toward acquainting success with material gain, the social power and prestige that come with material success, the ego-gratification effect of receiving money, as well as the relief the spy in financial need feels upon receiving their pay. Thompson also makes the intriguing suggestion that a willingness to take risks, one of the personality traits that might attract an individual to a career as an intelligence collector, may also inadvertently contribute to poor financial decisions that place an individual in a state of financial need and to view espionage as a plausible remedy.⁵

Ideology – An ideology is simply a shared set of beliefs about how the world is or ought to be. Psychiatrist and author Steven Pinker writes, "An ideology cannot be identified with a part of the brain or even with a whole brain, because it is distributed across the brains of many people."⁶ Since it represents a shared belief system, an ideology is adopted by an individual to the degree that it reflects the individual's ego. In that sense, an ideology is like another motivation - money - in that it serves as a vehicle for the individual to express a personal value or belief; an ideology is chosen in order to confirm conscious or unconscious beliefs the

⁴ Levchenko, S. (1988) *On the wrong side: My life in the KGB*. New York: Pergamon.

⁵ Thompson, T. (2009) *Why Espionage Happens*. Florence SC: Seaboard Press.

⁶ Pinker, S. (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking

individual has already internalized.⁷ In the case of espionage, a particular ideology may serve as either the actual motivation for a spy to breach the trust placed in them or simply as a means of rationalizing that behavior. The so-called Cambridge Five⁸ were likely “true believers” whose motivation for working with the Soviets against their native United Kingdom was based largely (but not exclusively) in a utopian belief in Communist ideology. Before the Cold War ended, however, ideology appeared to play a decreasing role in Soviet recruitment, forcing the KGB to seek other motives.⁹ Nevertheless, Cold War-era political beliefs were only one form of ideology, and its demise certainly does not rule out the use of ideology as motivation in the present or future.

Compromise/Coercion – This is a negative rather than positive form of motivation and can be equated with what one might think of as “blackmail” or perhaps even torture. Unlike the other general forms of motivation offered in MICE, in this case the spy does not act of his or her own free will but, rather, is effectively forced to commit espionage through fear of punishment, exposure of wrongdoing, or some other undesirable outcome. From a psychological perspective, it is the least reliable method of recruitment since the spy’s primary motivation is to escape punishment rather than to please his or her handler. The spy is likely to cooperate only to the extent necessary and may attempt to break free of control as soon as practicable. An infamous example of compromise is the so-called “Honey Trap,” in which a foreign intelligence service would direct a man or woman to seduce a targeted individual in order to obtain their cooperation through threat of exposure.

Ego – This could be considered the all-inclusive category, since an individual’s opinion of him- or herself and the effort he or she puts into enhancing or defending that opinion is fundamental to their decision-making. Levchenko’s use of the term was more focused and meant to highlight the potential spy’s desire for challenge, adventure, and excitement.¹⁰ Later efforts that went beyond MICE would identify personality traits such as narcissism or attitudes such as employee disgruntlement that are manifestly ego-related but perhaps more insightful than Levchenko’s risk-taking behavior. In fact, with the exception of coercion, all of the MICE categories may fall under ego, inasmuch as money and ideology serve as vehicles for the expression of ego.

While still popular and oft-cited, MICE is of somewhat limited value in predicting who will or will not commit espionage. First, the categories are too general and lack nuance, so they fail to identify in a practical manner the myriad and complex motivation of individual spies. Furthermore, as limited, general categories, employing them runs the risk of making the

⁷ Shermer, M. (2011) *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies – How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths*. New York: Times Books

⁸ Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross were recruited while attending Cambridge University in the UK.

⁹ Herbig & Wiskoff (2002). Other examples of ideologically-motivated US spies would include Cold War-era spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and, more recently, DIA analyst and Cuban spy Ana Montes.

¹⁰ Scheibe, K. (1994) “The Temptations of Espionage: Self-Control and Social Control.” *Citizen Espionage*. Ed. Sarbin, T. et al. Westport CT: Praeger

behavior fit the category, resulting in ascribing oversimplified motivation such as “Ames was greedy” or “Hannsen was arrogant.” Finally, being an expression of conventional wisdom or common sense, they are not based on any actual scientific research. The US government would begin to address that problem in the wake of the enormous damage to national security wrought by Navy Chief Warrant Officer John Anthony Walker and his ring of spies.

The Stilwell Commission Report

Walker was arrested in May 1985, after his ex-wife informed the FBI about his spying on behalf of the Soviet Union. The *New York Times* later reported that Walker may have provided enough code-data information to significantly alter the balance of power between the US and the USSR.¹¹ In June of the same year, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger established the Department of Defense Security Review Commission in order to determine the effectiveness of security clearance procedures. Under the chairmanship of retired Army General Richard G. Stilwell, the commission produced a number of recommendations in what came to be known as The Stilwell Commission Report.¹²

Recognizing that up to that time security decisions were often subjective, the commission recommended that policies be grounded in hard evidence and scientific method.¹³ This resulted in the establishment of two organizations that were given the mission of researching the psychology of those who had committed espionage against the United States: the Personnel Security Research Center (PERSEREC) in Monterey, California, and the Community Research Center in Newington, Virginia, whose research efforts would fall under the name “Project Slammer.”

PERSEREC Collects the Data

PERSEREC's initial effort was to establish a database on all Americans involved in espionage against the US since World War II based on media reports, trial records, and unclassified official documents. The database would “ma[k]e it possible to systematically collect, quantitatively code, and statistically analyze basic information. This included such things as personal background, the methods and motivations of the offender, and pertinent facts about the crime itself -- situational features, what was lost or compromised, and consequences for the subject.”¹⁴ Drawing from a database that included (at the time) 120 cases of espionage, PERSEREC issued a May 1992, report entitled, “Americans Who Spied Against Their Country Since World War II”, which identified six key motivations. In addition to adding substance to the old MICE categories of *money*, *ideology*, and *coercion*, PERSEREC researchers suggested

¹¹ O'Connor, John J. “American Spies in Pursuit of the American Dream.” *NY Times*. 4 Feb, 1990

¹² Department of Defense Security Review Commission (1985) *A Report to the Secretary of Defense by the Commission to Review DoD Security Policy and Practices*. Washington, DC: DoD Security Review Commission

¹³ Fischer, L. (2013) *Espionage: Why Does it Happen?* Department of Defense Security Institute [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

¹⁴ Fischer (2013)

three additional motivations, *disgruntlement/revenge*, *ingratiation*, and *thrills/self-importance*, which were in effect more refined views of the MICE category *ego*.

Disgruntlement/revenge – The spy is motivated by a non-ideological resentment or anger directed toward their country or their employer for some perceived injustice, such as a lack of recognition or inadequate appreciation, failure to achieve promotion, inadequate pay or other compensation, or any number of other perceived personal slights. As a result, the spy seeks revenge by engaging in espionage. A key point is that the injustice may or may not be real, but it is perceived by the spy as both real and personal. Thompson suggests that unrealistic expectations of workplace fulfillment, the depersonalization of large bureaucracies, overestimation of an individual's actual talent, and a culture of disgruntlement fostered by a constant stream of negative media reporting all contribute to disgruntlement.¹⁵ Psychiatrist David Charney, who has interviewed several convicted spies, makes the counterintuitive observation that spies who act out of disgruntlement toward their own agency often continue to view themselves as patriotic citizens and claim it was never their intention to do damage to their country.¹⁶

Ingratiation – The spy is motivated by a desire to please another person. While it would seem unlikely that an individual would choose to spy simply in order to please another person, ingratiation may be a contributing factor in that decision. For example, if a spy is ideologically motivated, they may work especially hard to please their handler in an effort to demonstrate their commitment to the cause. Navy Seaman Michael Walker, son of John Anthony Walker and part of his father's spy ring, testified that he became a spy in 1983 "for the money and to please my father."¹⁷ Ingratiation may also have played a role in the so-called "Romeo" operations conducted by the East German *Stasi*, in which a *Stasi* agent would establish a romantic relationship with a lonely, female secretary in a target West German organization. Unlike coercive "Honey Traps," the espionage was often based on genuine bonds of affection between the target and her "Romeo."¹⁸

Thrills/self-importance – This motivation is likely what Levchenko had in mind by the term *ego*. In its purest form, it might be considered the most egocentric of motivations, since it does not necessarily include a desire for personal gain or revenge against some perceived slight. In practice, it is likely a significant contributing factor but not necessarily the key motivation. The spy chooses espionage because of the feeling of excitement it brings, as well as the sense of superiority the spy derives from "putting one over" on their colleagues or their organization. Rather than a manifestation of high self-esteem, it may be the result of the low

¹⁵ Thompson (2009)

¹⁶ Charney, D. (2010) "True Psychology of the Insider Spy." *The Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*, Volume 18, Number 1, Fall/Winter 2010. Pages 47-54. Dr. Charney has interviewed US insider spies Robert Hanssen, Earl Pitts, and Brian Patrick Regan.

¹⁷ Associated Press. "Member of spy ring released after 15 years." *cjonline.com*. The Topeka Capital-Journal, 17 Feb. 2000. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.

¹⁸ Wolf, M. (1997) *Man Without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism's Greatest Spymaster*. New York: Times Books

self-esteem experienced by the would-be-spy suffering some personal or professional setback. Ironically, the very desire for thrills that attracts some IC employees to the profession may also make them particularly susceptible to the thrill of espionage. Likewise, the power and ego-enhancement that comes with keeping secrets from others may add to the feeling of superiority the spy obtains by keeping his or her espionage a secret from their co-workers and organization.

Project Slammer Interviews the Convicts

While PERSEREC focused on collecting as much data as possible from a variety of sources in order to build a database that might assist in identifying the personality traits of known spies, the Community Research Center (CRC) went directly to the source by conducting interviews with incarcerated US spies. Under the name "Project Slammer," the CRC initially interviewed thirty spies who agreed to undergo hours of psychological testing and in-depth discussion. CRC also interviewed individuals associated with the spy in order to obtain a better understanding of the spy's private life and how others perceived them at the time of their espionage. Although complementary, the two efforts were distinct in that PERSEREC's findings were based on the statistical analysis of quantitative data on a large number of variables or indicators, while Project Slammer's were based on a qualitative, in-depth case study analysis of information on a smaller selection of offenders.¹⁹

In April 1990, Project Slammer issued its first, classified interim report, which has since been made available to the public, identifying general behavioral traits common to the subjects interviewed.²⁰ The report concluded that the spy perceives him- or herself as special, even unique, not a bad person, deserving yet dissatisfied with his or her situation, having no other (or easier) option than to engage in espionage and, at any rate, simply doing what others frequently do. The spy also believes security procedures do not apply to him or her, and that security programs have no meaning unless they connect to something with which he or she can personally identify.

The spy also isolates him- or herself from the consequences of spying by rationalizing his or her behavior. A spy will interpret their behavior in a way that leaves espionage as the "only option" and an essentially victimless crime. Once the spy commits to espionage, he or she reinforces their rationalizations by belittling the security system and highlighting the ease with which they are able to fool others and bypass safeguards. After time, however, the initial excitement of their deception fades, while stress increases. Nevertheless, they are reluctant to attempt to break out of their situation because the risks of punishment are too high. Interestingly, spies do not consider themselves traitors, finding some self-justification for their actions, and do not display remorse until after they are apprehended. Finally, spies usually do not consider committing espionage until after they are in a position of trust.

¹⁹ Fischer (2013)

²⁰ Director of Central Intelligence (1990) *Project SLAMMER Interim Report*. Washington, DC: Intelligence Community Staff

Holes in the Screen

The efforts of PERSEREC and Project Slammer stand out as the first serious attempts at understanding the psychology of espionage. Unfortunately, despite the insight gained, espionage cases continued. In 1994, Carson Eoyang, Ph.D., addressed this reality by examining what he considered models of espionage.²¹ He postulated that there were effectively two models: *p-models* (p-psychology) that sought to identify the individual traits (personality, needs, emotions, mental health) that separated those who commit espionage from those who do not, and *s-models* (s-situational) that seek to identify the situations in which espionage is most likely to be committed and then to create mechanisms or procedures designed to prevent that possibility.

In comparing the two, he demonstrates that p-models will inevitably result in both false-positives and false-negatives, that is, they will screen out individuals as possessing traits that would indicate future espionage but who would, if placed in a position of trust, never actually commit espionage, while failing to screen out individuals who do not appear to possess those traits who do, under the right circumstances, commit espionage. For similar reasons, s-models fail in that once an individual is considered trustworthy they are frequently placed in a position that allows them the means of countering security measures.

Eoyang proposes a *situational-dispositional model* which acknowledges that “espionage agents and heroic patriots may share similar personal characteristics”²² and seeks to match the unique individual and environmental factors that combine to create the possibility of espionage. However, he also writes that developing “a comprehensive and sophisticated program of countermeasures is by no means an easy or quick accomplishment.”²³

Recent research in the field of epigenetics²⁴ may suggest one reason why the task of identifying specific traits that would effectively screen out potential spies is an important but inevitably imperfect endeavor. Human behavior is almost infinitely complex, being the culmination of a unique lifetime of experience, belief, and conscious or unconscious bias. While screening for personality traits is effective in identifying the most overt and undesirable ones, a particular trait may, like a genetic predisposition, lie more or less dormant until activated by a specific set of circumstances. In this scenario, a benign trait may suddenly become cause for alarm, or an otherwise desirable trait may manifest itself in undesirable behavior.

²¹ Eoyang, C. (1994) “Models of Espionage.” *Citizen Espionage*. Ed. Sarbin, T. et al. Westport CT: Praeger

²² Eoyang (1994)

²³ Eoyang (1994)

²⁴ *Epigenetics* involves genetic control by factors other than an individual's DNA sequence. Epigenetic changes can switch genes on or off and determine which proteins are transcribed. (“What Is Epigenetics? How Do Epigenetic Changes Affect Genes?” Retrieved from <http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/epigenetic-influences-and-disease-895>, May 8, 2014)

Beyond Screening and Security

In a 2010 article, psychiatrist David Charney took a step beyond traditional screening models, proposing that regardless of motivation, once insider spies have crossed the line into espionage they tend to follow similar thought patterns that manifest in predictable behaviors.²⁵ Based on personal interviews with incarcerated spies, Charney postulated that the decision to spy is based on “an intolerable sense of personal failure, as privately defined by that person.” Once the spy has made the decision to engage in espionage, Charney identifies what he calls The Ten Life Stages of the Insider Spy: 1) the sensitizing stage, 2) the stress/spiral stage, 3) the crisis/climax/resolution stage, 4) the post-recruitment stage, 5) the remorse-morning-after stage, 6) the active spy career stage, 7) the dormancy stage(s), 8) the pre-arrest stage, 9) the arrest and post-arrest stage, and 10) the brooding in jail stage. Each stage represents a development in the spy’s effort to deal with their sense of personal failure by taking what they consider decisive action to boost their sense of worth. This is initially effective, but eventually the spy succumbs to second thoughts, feelings of regret, of being trapped, loneliness, and dependence on their handler. Charney’s theory also postulates that certain stages present windows in which, given specific incentives, the spy may choose to reveal their activities to an appropriate authority.

Finally, while not specifically a work of psychology, security expert Nick Catrantzos offers a method of dealing with the insider threat based on group psychology that is essentially independent of the motivation of the insider spy.²⁶ While recognizing the necessary role of security professionals in any organization, Catrantzos offers a method that focuses on the group dynamics of an office in an effort to promote specific group behaviors and values. He postulates that the insider spy operates in the “dark corners” between the efforts of security professionals and the measures they institute and insider’s fellow employees, who may not only feel security is not an issue they need be concerned with but may also be hostile to security practices they consider unnecessary or a hindrance. Catrantzos’ offers ideas on how both groups can work together in an effort to close those security gaps and allow no space where the insider spy can comfortably operate.

Problems in Understanding the Psychology of Espionage

Despite the significant threat spies pose to national security, relatively little published material is available to the general public regarding the psychology of espionage. Naturally, some research is and should remain classified in order to protect sources and methods. Other information may be withheld for legal reasons. What is available, however, still suffers from one key problem: there are (fortunately) not that many spies accessible to psychology professionals on which to base research. Statistical conclusions (such as the traits that would identify a propensity toward espionage) are less valid when based on a small sample size. When compared to the hundreds of thousands of cleared individuals who never commit

²⁵ Charney (2010)

²⁶ Catrantzos, N. (2012) *Managing the Insider Threat: No Dark Corners*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press

espionage, the fraction of those who do is almost infinitesimally small. This is compounded by the reality that research can only be done on those individuals who are both known to be spies and accessible to researchers. That translates to spies in prison and serving time for their crimes. Individual incarcerated spies may or may not be motivated to work with researchers.

The last and most intractable issue regarding understanding the psychology of espionage is the sheer complexity of personal motivation. Like the weather, behavior is predictable, but only to a certain degree. Measures can be enacted to screen out, secure from, or mitigate the actions of the insider spy, but it is unlikely they will ever prove universally and unerringly effective. The individual human mind is often an enigma and, as such, will continue to confound law enforcement, fascinate scientists and historians, and provide engaging storylines to writers of spy fiction.

Authors

Dr. David L. Charney is the founder and Medical Director of Roundhouse Square Psychiatric Center, Alexandria, Virginia. He has become familiar with the Intelligence Community as a consultant and therapist to IC personnel for many years. He had the opportunity to join the defense team of his first spy case, Earl Pitts. Building on that foundation, Robert Hanssen's attorney, Plato Cacheris, invited Dr. Charney to join his defense team, which added a fascinating further dimension to his experience. With his third spy case, Brian Regan, Dr. Charney's in-depth knowledge of the psychological nuances of captured spies is unmatched. As a member of their defense teams, Dr. Charney was received by these spies as an understanding and supportive figure, which lowered their defensive mindsets, providing a truer picture of their inner lives. Many common assumptions of spy motivation have been brought into question by Dr. Charney's work. To further extend his findings, he has been working on a policy White Paper in which he will amplify his psychological findings and also propose new and perhaps controversial initiatives to better protect the country from spying.

John Alan Irvin has spent 14 years in the U.S. Army and 10 with the Central Intelligence Agency. He has been an artillery, paratroop, and psychological operations officer. At the CIA he served in the Clandestine Service as both a collection management and case officer as well as in managerial positions.