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Intelligence Operations and Personality: Are There Guidelines for Assessment?

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Title: Intelligence Operations and Personality: Are There Guidelines for Assessment?

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Abstract. This article explores whether there are appropriate guidelines for assessing the personality of a potential intelligence agent.

Comprehensive psychological assessment of an individual often comprises structured and unstructured interviews, overt and covert behavioral observation, and objective and projective psychological testing of that individual. In addition, the assessment often comprises the study of that individual's records--e.g., criminal justice, educational, military, employment, and social service--and interviews with family members, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and others who have knowledge of that individual. To engage in all of the above may or may not be effective as to cost, time, and congruence with accuracy. The rationale for the assessment may require depth as opposed to breadth; some records may not be available; potential interviewees will be deceptive and may be reluctant, ambivalent, or even hostile towards participation; some tests may be inappropriately normed or based on inapplicable interpretive strategies; some--if not most or all--interview formats may be lacking in adequate reliabilities and validities; some, if not most, behavioral observation strategies may be unethical, immoral, illegal, or irrelevant.

Assessing the likelihood that an individual might look favorably on becoming an intelligent agent--a typical psychological assessment performed or managed by an intelligence case officer--is an additional difficulty. The very act of carrying out the elements of an assessment may "tip off" the potential agent or others--including hostile counterintelligence personnel--who might have a variety of reactions not in the interests of the enterprising case officer. The question then becomes how to reliably, validly, and at least somewhat nonreactively and unobtrusively effect a noncomprehensive assessment before an approach or "pitch" is made.

As an example, let's focus on a potential agent's personality and the assessment component of interviews with some of that individual's social contacts. Even if appropriate rationales for interviewing social contacts can be constructed without raising undue suspicions by the interviewees, how certain can a case officer be about the accuracy of the information?

Psychological research on the personality estimates of nonoverlapping social groups seems to be germane in answering this question. In this research, an individual can be rated on well-validated personality attributes--such as the Big Five personality factors of neuroticism, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Malloy et al below.) Each individual may be rated on these attributes by different classes of social contacts: family, friends, and coworkers. The members within each class--e.g., family members--usually know each other but may not know the members of other classes--e.g., coworkers. Results suggest that the members within each class often exhibit significant agreement among themselves as to an individual's personality makeup--even if the members do not interact with each other as they make their ratings. The amount of agreement about an individual's personality between classes of social contacts is usually much less.

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Assuming adequate generalizability of this research to the affairs of the case officer, one is left with a potential agent with different personalities--each provided by different classes of social contacts and to a lesser extent different members within a class. Moreover, psychological research also suggests that individuals (1) differ in how similar or different they are perceived both within and between classes of social contacts, (2) tend to overestimate how similarly others share their views and estimates, (3) exhibit illusory correlations of data in developing a social estimate, and (4) tend to attribute noxious behaviors of others more often to personality and other "internal" features and less often to social and other "external" features than is warranted. (The converse seems accurate for an individual's own behavior.)

Still other research suggests that employing statistical rules as opposed to intuition and hunches for interview data may generate more valid personality assessments. Yet these rules may still lack requisite sensitivity with single cases so important in intelligence work. Thus, an intelligence case officer may be judicious in shunning assessment of all but the most highly motivating aspects of personality functioning--e.g. Issues of longing, revenge, shame, overcompensation--when considering the likely responsiveness of a potential agent. (See Funder, D.C., Colvin, C.R. (1988). Friends and strangers: Acquaintanceship, agreement, and the accuracy of personality judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 149-158; Malloy, T.E., Albright, L., Kenny, D.A., Agatstein, F., & Winkquist, L. (1997). Interpersonal perception and metaperception in nonoverlapping social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 390-398; Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.) (Keywords: Intelligence, Investigation, Personality.)