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Can One Control People Who Can't Control Themselves? A Personnel Security Challenge

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Abstract. This article identifies a psychological phenomenon that is often ignored, discounted, and/or mismanaged within the personnel security programs of government and business.

Most personnel security programs are explicitly or implicitly developed and managed on the premise that people have control over potentially problematic behavior. A number of independent and interrelated philosophical premises that support such a premise: (1) People have the requisite combinations of rationality and logic to think through the consequences of their behavior and then act accordingly. (2) People have the requisite amounts of "sense of control" that are then commensurate with functional authority over their behavior. (3) People have free will. (4) People not only have the ability to initiate and control their behavior but the motivation to as well. Based on such philosophical premises, personnel security experts seek to publicize increases in penalties for security violations, in the comprehensiveness and depth of security education and training, and in the direct and indirect monitoring of personnel's behavior at any time. The experts' rationale seems to be that personnel's rational and logical calculi of such measures will have a salutary effect on security. (An IBPP assumption is that the limited resources--viz., money, materiel, personnel--of personnel security authorities lead these authorities to publicize most security initiatives as an assumed deterrent to security violations.)

However, self-observation, the observation of others, and systematic psychological research seem to cast doubt on the validity of the above premises and the efficacy of programs based on such premises. For example, people report that at times they feel out of control. At times they confide--after the fact-- that they were not in control of specific behaviors or during some interlude in their lives. People also report that their inferences and attributions about others--e.g., during or after the latter's violent behavior, aberrance, or "out-of-character" acts--suggest that these others seem to be out of control. Moreover, psychological research traditions--that some behaviors some of the time seem to be "mindless," instinctive, unconscious or preconscious, and automatic--also mitigate against the notion that people even frequently control behavior. The same is the case for explorations of the cognitive mechanisms that make people feel as if they are acting consciously and willfully--regardless of whether the behavior in question is a products of consciousness and willfulness. For example, people make attributions that they intentionally caused their own behavior when the latter was unknowingly (to the people making the attributions) coerced or functionally controlled by others, environmentally triggered, or merely imagined before the behavior occurred. (An IBPP assumption is that security authorities sometimes do not publicize some personnel security program elements and do publicize some others without the goal of deterring security violations and with the goal of impeding, stopping, and otherwise preventing such violations. However, the behavioral targets of these programs are rarely security violations associated with will, intent, premeditation, consciousness, control and so on.)

Thus, one might well surmise that personnel security methods premised on the self-control of problematic behavior may be ineffective when such behavior is out of control or beyond control. It follows that an "in-house" or "out-of-house" evaluation of personnel security programs needs to not only ensure that policies and programs address the control Issue but also to discern whether there are differential success and failure rates for stemming security violations stemming from various sorts of

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control--including no control at all. And so an exhortation to be mindful of the mindless and to harbor the will to consider those who are not only willfull but without will. (See Bargh, J.A., & Chartrand, T.L. (1999). The unbearable automaticity of being. American Psychologist, 54, 462-479; Carver, C.S., & Scheier, M.F. (1998). On the self-regulation of behavior. NY: Cambridge University Press; Langer, E.J. (1978). Rethinking the role of thought in social interaction. In J.H. Harvey, W. Ickes, & R.F. Kidd (Eds.), New Directions in Attribution Research (Vol. 2, pp. 35-58). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; Wegner, D.M., & Wheatley, T. (1999). Apparent mental causation. American Psychologist, 54, 480-492; Zajonc, R.B. (1980). Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences. American Psychologist, 35, 151-175.) (Keywords: Control, Personnel Security, Will.)