The Person in Personnel Security: A Vulnerability in Espionage Analysis

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Abstract. This article describes some espionage-relevant context variables within which individual behavior is embedded.

Commentators on the psychology of espionage typically focus on a perpetrator's or alleged perpetrator's personality traits and dispositions as the primary causal factors leading to violations of trust, treason, and the like. However, organizational, situational, political, economic, cultural, and yet other constituents of a real or alleged perpetrator's context may be even more causally robust and often impede investigations and adjudications concerning whether espionage has occurred and, if so, who has committed it.

(1) An organization may be in trouble. Its mission is not being effectively achieved. There may be accusations of misbehavior--whether violations of personal propriety or of professional integrity. At such times, thresholds to activate or further empower counterespionage assets may be lowered as a diversionary tactic by leaders facing a threat to their power. This may occur irrespective of any actual espionage behavior. Accusations of espionage within the organization also can serve as a vehicle to weaken one's competitors and advance one's own power strivings.

(2) Belief systems generated by organizational cultures can prove problematic in identifying espionage perpetrators. For example, cultures reifying the polygraph as detector of truth and falsehood as opposed to psychophysiological reactivity to questions embedded in a multivariate context may absolve the guilty and tar the innocent. Belief systems that discount the asymmetry between an interrogatee's belief in an answer and that answer's correspondence to some truth outside the interrogatee comprise a case in point. Other examples include beliefs that (a) higher frequency counts of security violations necessarily suggest some higher propensity for espionage; that (b) employees may not commit espionage unknowingly in the context of seemingly acceptable scientific or political information exchange; and that (c) certain ethnic, racial, or political groupings are de facto more likely to engage in espionage, less likely to achieve various military, economic, and other breakthroughs without espionage--and so on. Still others include "lose-lose" propositions concerning espionage suspects--e.g., knowing a representative of an enemy is suspicious, while seeming not to know a representative of an enemy is suspicious. Then there is the organizational penchant to be on the hunt for "big spies" as the primary threat as opposed to the continuous linking of unclassified and some improperly obtained or leaked classified information on the part of the enemy.

(3) An organization may have launched and nurtured policies intended to intensify a relationship with another organization or type of organization. The threshold of seriously launching an espionage investigation against representatives of the latter or one's own representatives interfacing with the latter often significantly increases. A related phenomenon includes the latter organization beginning to comply with policy requests of the former or to act compatibly with the former's policy--compliance and compatibility increasing the threshold for an investigation. The converse is that more serious adversaries should continuously and increasingly make up the "usual suspects."

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(4) An organization's management, promotion, award, decoration, layoff, suspension, and firing policies may increase probabilities of engaging in espionage among diverse segments of that organization's population--often irrespective of many of the latters' traits and dispositions, even those seemingly relevant to espionage.

(5) An organization may exhibit satisficing behavior. Once someone seems to fit a narrative that, in turn, fits an allegation of espionage, other suspects are quickly ignored and still others who might have been suspects do not come to the attention of investigators.

An immediate conclusion about the person in personnel security is that it may ineluctably become a "fall guy" for smoking-gun context factors in the counterespionage quest. Counterintelligence, counterespionage, and personnel security efforts then necessarily suffer. (See Danoff, L. (2000). The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act: Law enforcement's secret weapon. Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, 28, 213-224; de Boucaud, D., Bourgeois, M., & Favarel-Garrigues, B. The delusion of espionage, professional illness? Annales Medico-Psychologiques, 2, 767-776; Henry, F. (1943). Japanese espionage and our psychology for failure. Proceedings. United States Naval Institute, 69, 639-641; Lingamneni, J. R. (1997). Computer crime. Caribbean Journal of Criminology and Social Psychology, 2, 85-95; Sarbin, T. R., Carney, R. M., & Eoyang, C. (Eds.). (1992). Citizen espionage: Studies in trust and betrayal. Westport, CT, US: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.; Stone, L. A. (1992). Canonical correlation between security clearance adjudication concerns and later motivational causes for espionage behavior. Forensic Reports, 5, 305-316.) (Keywords: Espionage, Personnel Security.)

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