

What exactly do spies do? What attributes and skills are they selected and trained for? How accurate is the popular “James Bond” description of what spies and spying are all about? How psychological is the spying business?

TRUST, TREASON AND TREACHERY: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPYING

By Adrian Furnham and John Taylor

“In the world of intelligence, it is trust not betrayal which dominates the mindset”

Driving fast cars, mixing smart cocktails, and mastering whizz-kid gadgets are not central to the job. The essential business of spies is *obtaining secret intelligence*. Indeed, MI6 is officially known as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). It is the job of spies to obtain accurate and secret intelligence about particular issues of relevance to their governments.

Spies have to find, charm, befriend and motivate agents effectively to commit treason. Many of the best secrets come from people who are betraying their country or terrorist organisation. The spies' job is to find people who have secrets they want (they call these people ‘agents’), assess their potential motivation to spy, understand their personality and motivation (will they be reliable?), recruit them as a secret source, and then manage them as they pass their secrets, often in very dangerous circumstances. This is a deeply complex and sophisticated task.

It follows that agents are recruited not because they have the desirable skills and attributes necessary for such a demanding job, but for one reason alone – do they have access to secrets that the spies and their masters want?

Spies, that is the professional intelligence officers, have therefore to have excellent judgement and influencing skills. It is a skilful business using a range of sophisticated psychological techniques. It is often said that they need the combined skills of an actor, salesman, counsellor and journalist.

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defections and the most valuable sources are always people who have critical information (i.e., secrets). It is a world of shadows and rumours and intrigue. The costs are high; treason is a capital offence in many countries. We hear about the failures and mistakes but rarely about the successes.

So spies search out people who have the information their organisation and country want: military developments and plans; nuclear weapons and energy; powerful political organisations and individuals.

RECRUITING AGENTS

The essential requirement is that agents have access to information the spies want. Increasingly in counter-terrorist and criminal operations, they need to penetrate specific organisations. Some offer the information by walking into embassies in foreign countries. Others have to be bribed, seduced and induced to reveal their secrets. Some are angry and

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vengeful whistle-blowers; others are motivated by ideology. Some are not very likeable or emotionally well adjusted.

The first and most obvious problem for the spy (often called a “handler”) is to understand, motivate and reward people they might not like and who are very different from them. This is where the psychology comes in. The task is to befriend (cultivate) an individual, maybe from a very different culture and background, to give up their secrets. In doing so, many agents take great risks with their own life and that of their family. And so do the spies, for if they are caught, they may well be executed, or “disappear”.

RECRUITING AND RUNNING AGENTS

The real motivation of the agent is not the only challenge facing the handler. They must be able to identify personality traits that might affect the agent’s performance and reliability. They also need to assess whether they can be debriefed efficiently so as to enable a report of value to be written. They have to manage them and the relationship.

The classic agent operation involves developing a relationship, which can last months before the handler attempts to recruit the agent. The agent may not realise they are the subject of scrutiny until the spy makes a proposal, referred to as the “recruitment”. It is only then that the spy declares who they really are, who they work for and what they want.

Handlers receive a lot of training in how to meet, cultivate, recruit and run an agent. There are essentially seven steps (see figure 1).

Potential agents need to be found. Usually, the next step is developing some sort of relationship with them. While this is occurring, there is a great deal of assessment essentially about two things: what they know, and what they are like. Then, and only then, are they formally recruited, so they know who they are dealing with and “the rules of the game”.

Often, the trickiest bit is what is called *handling*, which means developing the relationship to get the secret information that is wanted. The spy-agent relationship may continue for many years, which means a handler has to hand over the relationship to a colleague when he or she is posted to another assignment. Finally, when the task is done, the relationship is terminated.

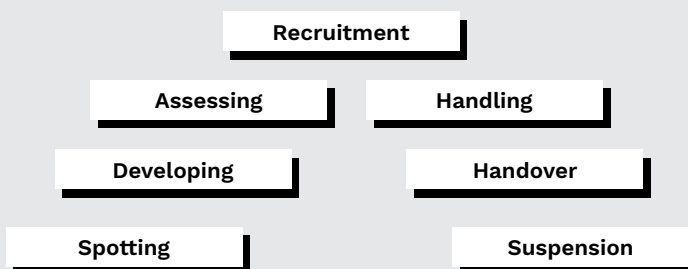
UNDERSTANDING AGENTS

Spies have to assess their agents, as do selectors. They have to understand how they deal with stress, how they build relationships, how easily they learn and follow instructions, and where any potential danger points are.

Clearly, agents can’t be put through assessment centres with all the sophisticated techniques used by work psychologists (the CIA do ask their agents to go through a polygraph test). Spies, often working in a second (or third) language, may only have short, clandestine meetings with their agent to try and understand them. Many agents are difficult, disturbed and unattractive individuals; but all have to be cultivated and recruited.

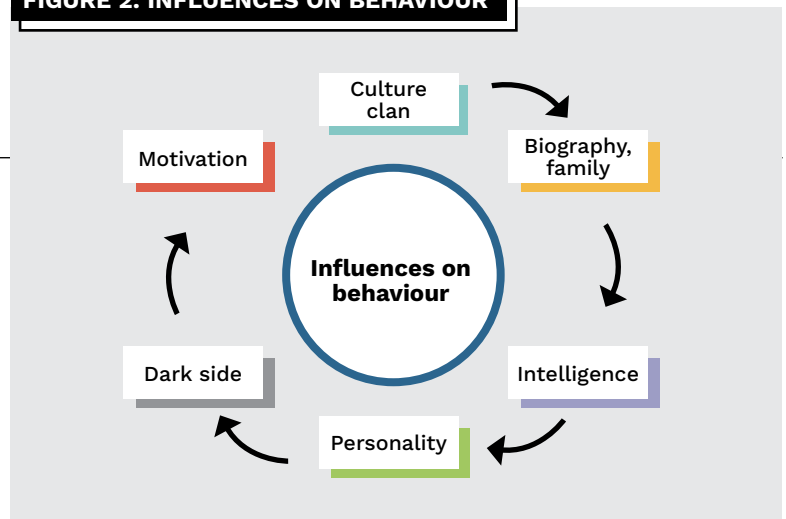
The question is how to achieve that end. There appear to be six things that one needs to know in order to understand an individual.

FIGURE 1: STAGES IN THE SPY-AGENT RELATIONSHIP



The **first** is the cultural and sub-cultural background of the agent. This is essentially cross-cultural psychology and draws upon the work of people like Hofstede. It is about how the place and time a person grows up shape their world view. We know how influential the titanic fascism-communism clash of the 1930s was in shaping so many famous spies. Is the potential agent an Egyptian Coptic Christian, a white South African, or a Baltic Russian? How did the place and time of their upbringing shape their world view and ideology?

FIGURE 2: INFLUENCES ON BEHAVIOUR



Second, what about their personal upbringing – their bio-data? Were their parents rich or poor, strict or liberal, cold or loving? Did they have any handicaps to overcome as a child? What was the predominant religion and belief system they were exposed to in their youth?

Third, are they bright enough to do the somewhat complex tasks required in the job? Is there evidence of their information-processing speed and retention that gives one confidence they could do the job?

Then it gets more familiar for psychologists. **Fourth**, what about their personality, paying particular attention to two traits: neuroticism and conscientiousness, which we know are the two strongest determinants of any work performance? Neuroticism, or emotional stability, is relevant primarily because it relates to how the agent copes with stress, both acute and chronic, which is an inherent part of the job. It is vitally important to know how agents regulate their emotions, what things make them most stressed and how adaptive their coping strategies are.

Fifth, and more relevant, are the dark-side personality traits: the sub-clinical personality disorders. Of these, two are particularly relevant: anti-social (psychopath) and narcissistic personality disorder. The focus on what is now called the “dark triad” has always been fundamental. Are they fantasists or mercurial? Are they a bit of a loner, unable to establish relationships?

And finally, **sixth**, possibly the most difficult bit: what really, fundamentally motivates them?

THE MOTIVATION

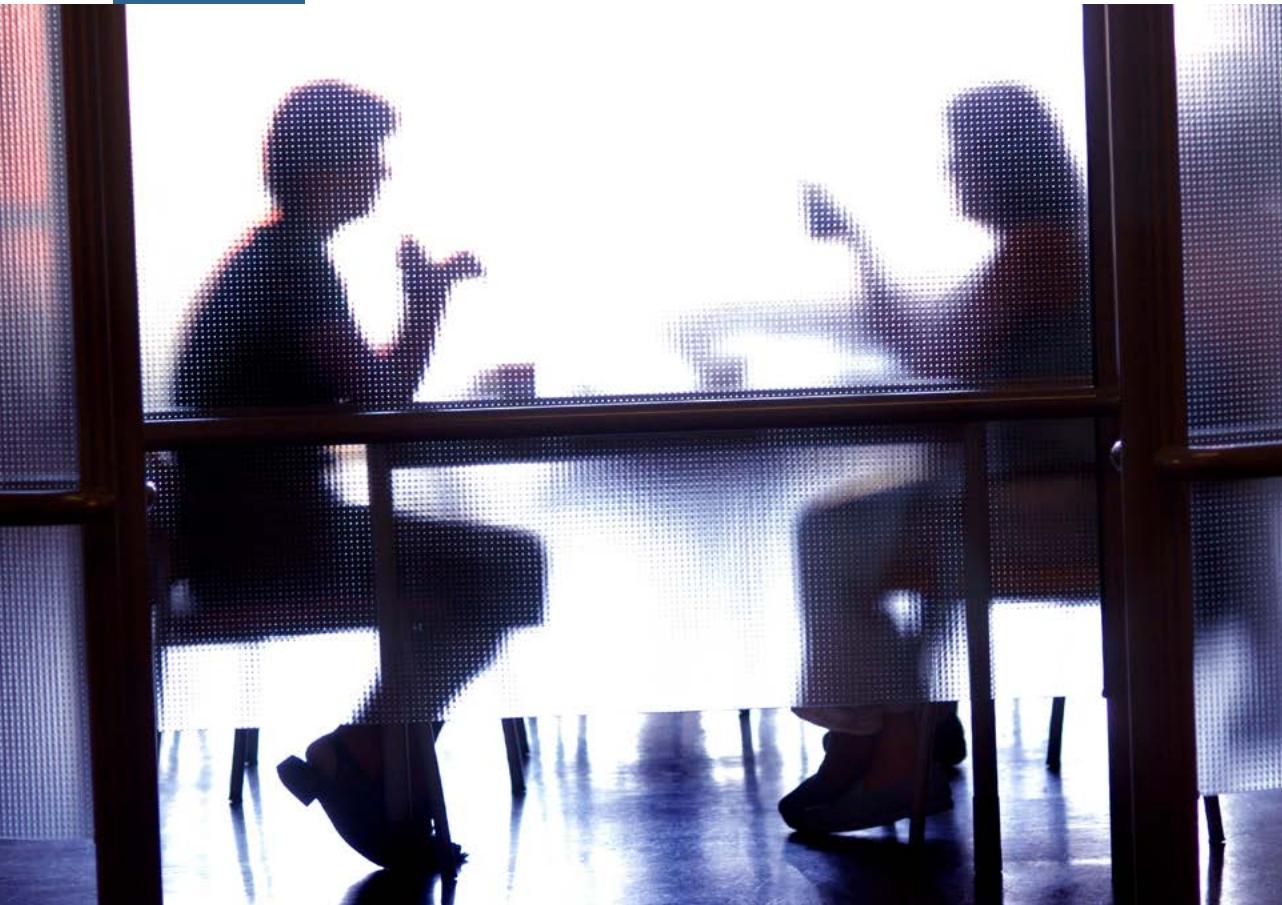
Differential psychologists usually attempt to measure three areas of an individual: ability, personality and motivation. It is usually agreed that it is the last of these that is most difficult to measure. For those in the spying business, one of the most important tasks is to try to understand the motives of the agent, which they themselves may not be able to articulate clearly.

An analysis of many successfully and unsuccessfully recruited and run agents suggests a short list of motives that can be crudely classified into three groups.

There are “push” factors concerning deep unhappiness and bitterness about the way they have been treated by an organisation they worked for. This could be a commercial or a government organisation. There are also “pull” factors to the world of espionage, such as

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powerful and deep-seated ideological beliefs, material benefits (mainly money) as a reward, and the sheer excitement of the whole activity. Third, there is the reward of a friendship and relationship with the spy and his/her colleagues.

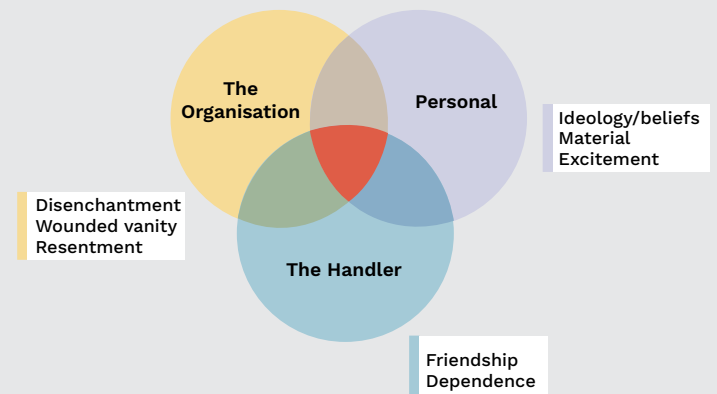
THE ORGANISATION

a. Disenchantment:

Many agents are deeply disenchanted with how they have been treated by an organisation and, through whistle-blowing, seek sweet revenge. There are different facets of disenchantment:

- 1 First, *organisational lying/hypocrisy* – the employee’s perception that what the organisation says about itself in public, and even to its employees, is a pack of lies. The more the organisation tries to capture the moral high ground, the more outraged the astounded and angry insider becomes.
- 2 Second, *perceived inequity* – the idea that some people in the organisation are treated very differently from others. It is the assertion

FIGURE 3.1: INFLUENCES ON BEHAVIOUR



that people are not fairly assessed, promoted and rewarded.

- 3 Third, *bullying and mistreatment*, which is the perception that some senior people are callous, uncaring, nasty and manipulative, and that you are a victim. Bosses are seen as bullies and backstabbers. Staff can forgive the occasional emotional outburst and unkind remark, but not

chronic, remorseless nastiness aimed specifically at them. Further, some organisations have a management style that is essentially aggressive and Machiavellian.

4 Fourth, *mutual distrust*, which is the feeling that the organisation does not even trust its own employees. Whilst top management may talk about, and demand, loyalty from their staff, it is clear that they do not trust their own employees. This is, of course, a two-way street. If the organisation lets it be known that it never really and fully trusts me with information, money and materials, why should I ever trust them?

5 Fifth, *broken promises* – expectations not being met. Employees are told what the organisations stand for, what is expected, and how things work. But, all too often, an employee does not have his or her expectations clarified, and then the promises are broken.

Disenchanted people are angry and vengeful. What better way to get one's own back than by "spilling the beans" on the major secrets of the organisation? After all, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

b. Wounded vanity and narcissism:

Wounded vanity or ego might well stimulate someone to seek revenge. There is a fine line between healthy self-esteem and serious, self-defeating narcissism. The latter is characterised by an insatiable craving for adoration, feeling a special entitlement and a right to be insensitive to others, but at the same time either enraged or crushed by criticism. It is the feeling that one deserves special treatment, and then being extremely upset if treated as "ordinary".

Narcissists can be energetic, charismatic, leader-like and willing to take the initiative to get projects moving. However, they are often arrogant, vain, overbearing, demanding, self-deceiving and pompous. They are so colourful and engaging, they often attract followers. But narcissism is a disorder of self-esteem; it's a cover-up.

Narcissists self-destruct because their self-aggrandisement blinds their personal judgement and perception. Their reaction to any sort of

criticism is extreme: shame, rage, tantrums. They aim to destroy that criticism, however well intended and useful it may have been. They are poor empathisers and thus have low emotional intelligence. They can be consumed by envy and disdain for others, prone to depression, manipulative, demanding and self-centred.

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The primary feature shared by both dimensions of narcissism is a tendency to act antagonistically towards others. Vulnerable narcissists have grandiose fantasies but are timid, insecure and consequently do not appear narcissistic on the surface. Grandiose narcissists have higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction and are more exhibitionist than vulnerable narcissists. Often, wounded vanity is a sign of vulnerable narcissism. Becoming involved with the spying world feeds their narcissism, which may have been badly wounded by events.



The Cambridge Spy Ring, an extraordinary Russian intelligence operation

The Cambridge Spy Ring passed information to the Soviet Union during the Second World War and was active in the UK from the 1930s until at least the early 1950s. None of the known members was ever prosecuted for spying.

The number and membership of the ring emerged slowly from the 1950s onwards. The public first became aware of the conspiracy after the sudden flight of Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess to the Soviet Union in 1951. Suspicion immediately fell on Harold “Kim” Philby, who eventually fled the country in 1963. Following Philby’s flight, British intelligence obtained confessions from Anthony Blunt and, much later, John Cairncross, who have come to be seen as the last two of the group of five.

The term “Cambridge” refers to the recruitment of the group during their education at the University of Cambridge in the 1930s.

All five were convinced that the Marxism–Leninism of the Soviet Union was the best-available political system, and especially the best defence against the rise of fascism. All pursued successful careers in branches of the British government. They passed large amounts of intelligence to the Soviet Union.

Russian intelligence has always been willing to invest in long-term operations. This is a rare example of recruiting agents with no access to intelligence. They were penetration agents.

PERSONAL FACTORS

These are often divided into three categories, although, of course, they overlap

a. Ideology:

Ideologies, like religious or political creeds, can be very attractive, because they explain so much. They make sense of the past and the present and offer a view of a much better future. They can and do dramatically improve a sense of self-worth and identity.

Some countries try to “indoctrinate” their people from a very early age to believe in, and adhere to, a set creed of beliefs that are about truth, justice and fairness. People absorb these differently; some are indifferent, others reject them, but many remain believers. They become zealous followers, quite intolerant of those who do not share their world view.

The twentieth century saw the growth and destruction of various powerful states (Nazi Germany, the USSR). In the 1930s in Western Europe, many had to choose between fascism and communism. Indeed, it was the time when the “Cambridge Five” chose communism, becoming Britain’s most notorious traitors, and personally responsible for the deaths of many people.

We are currently preoccupied with Islamic fundamentalism and the threat that various factions of Islam present. Sometimes, intelligence agents are “converts” to a creed, faith or ideology, such as Islam, Marxism or nationalism. Others are “dissidents” who were perhaps “born into it”. Their primary aim in betraying others is to further the cause. Ideology is a powerful yet very complex motivation for many.

b. Money:

Selling secrets is a potentially lucrative business. Money features in many cases, but spies don’t usually like an agent who is primarily motivated by money. Often, they don’t have much control over how the agent spends the money, and too much time is spent haggling over the amount the agent thinks a report is worth. This often

changes over time, when agents become greedy but have less useful information to reveal.

The crucial question is how they use and spend that money – what it symbolises for them. The mercenary, materialistic and greedy agent will need careful and constant monitoring. The need for money raises some interesting questions. Does everyone have a price? What is the fantasy associated with wealth? What do they really want to buy? Understanding what the money is for is an essential task for any spy.

c. Excitement:

Some people crave excitement more than others. Adrenaline junkies paradoxically relax with stimulation, just as smokers might turn to nicotine (a stimulant) to relax. Some people are serious risk-takers, sensation-seekers. They drive fast and choose risky recreational activities. They trade off accuracy for speed. They are prone to all sorts of gaffes, preferring to speak before they think.

In the world of espionage, it is important to draw a distinction between a liking for



excitement and risk. It is exciting going to a meeting when you know you are going to try and recruit the agent. Standing on a street outside a block of flats and trying to persuade someone to let you, a complete stranger, into the flat so you can talk to

them is exciting. A surveillance officer pursuing a target will get excited when they sense the target is about to meet someone or fill a dead-letter box. This excitement is self-induced.

There is added tension and therefore, for some, added excitement. Very few operations carry no risk; planning reduces that risk.

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Some agents are in it for the thrills, the “romance” of it all. But they can be unpredictable and unreliable. Like everything else, we need optimality in the appetite for risk; the individual should be neither an addict nor averse to undertaking well-calculated and planned risky activities.

FEAR, BLACKMAIL AND COERCION

The effect of torture, blackmail and any other form of coercion creates anger and huge resentment. Anyone who is suffering coercion will naturally want to get away from their tormentors as quickly as possible. It is not, therefore, a long-term motivation. Although it is morally reprehensible, there are cases of spying agencies using fear, blackmail and coercion to recruit agents and acquire intelligence. More than other methods, they raise ethical questions.

Agencies can now rummage about in a person's past much more easily, exposing these facts via the web. Perhaps the best-known form of coercion is blackmail. This might involve finding out about some aspect of the past of an individual that he or she desperately does not want revealed, perhaps by setting up a “sting” or a “honeytrap”, where a person is put in a situation that yields incriminating evidence.

Some of these techniques are well known, for example, when a man meets a woman apparently by chance. They strike up a conversation, enjoy a drink which is spiked with a powerful

John Vassall was appointed as a clerk to the military attaché's office at the British Embassy in Moscow in the 1950s. He was a homosexual and was befriended by a Polish diplomat who introduced him to the underground homosexual world in Moscow. Homosexuality was illegal and, in 1954, the KGB blackmailed him into working for them. But his handlers were also able to play on the fact that he was treated badly by his employers and colleagues in the British Embassy. Vassall was socially isolated by the snobberies and class hierarchies of diplomatic life and this contributed to his continued work for the KGB even after he returned to the UK.

He wrote in his book, *The Autobiography of a Spy*, “At this time, the very last person I could have gone to was the Ambassador. He was cold and aloof, and quite incapable of understanding me or what had happened.” He also found the naval attaché, Captain Bennett, impossible to approach on a personal level. And so, heavily resigned, Vassall met his KGB contacts at a secret rendezvous, as promised. (Vassall 1975)

drug, and he wakes up naked in a hotel room to be faced with incriminating photographs. These honeytraps are the stuff of movies, because they are a rich mix of human foibles and passion.

THE RELATIONSHIP

One motivation for an agent is the (inevitably) close, confiding and supportive relationship of spy and agent. Some agents clearly crave it. Ideally, the relationship will be one of trust and liking, which is most likely to produce the best results. But there are different approaches. The spy-agent relationship is often powerful and close. The life of the agent may be dependent on the spy. Their meetings may be like having a clandestine affair, which makes it very exciting. The agent has to

Oleg Gordievsky: The best agents deserve the best handlers

“At our next meeting, he [Gordievsky’s previous case officer] introduced me to my new mentor, Jack, who was brilliant, the best minder I had ever had. Young..., and besides being highly intelligent had all the warmth of a true family man. He was a first-class intelligence officer, but also truly kind, full of emotion and sensitivity, honest both professionally and in his principles. As the expression goes in Russian, he had a fine structure of soul....

“Joan was older, about 55, with ash-blonde hair, and a face that seemed to embody all the traditional British qualities of decency and honour. Over the next few years, another wonderful confidante. Not the least of her virtues was her skill as a listener.” (Gordievsky 1995)

These are the kind of relationships every handler should strive for. Gordievsky, a professional intelligence officer himself, was one of the great Western successes against the Soviet Union.






The selection, assessment, recruitment and running of agents is the bread and butter of spying. It is about having a very close relationship with someone possibly unlike oneself, and who one might actively dislike.

respect the spy; trust and liking make it more powerful.

The nature of the social relationship between spy and agent is deeply complex, often because so much is involved. In many cases, the agent and his/her family and friends could face death if found out.

CONCLUSION

The selection, assessment, recruitment and running of agents is the bread and butter of spying. It is about having a very close relationship with someone possibly unlike oneself, and who one might actively dislike. The skills involved are deeply psychological, requiring the insight and skill of a therapist, the management skills of a leader, and the impression management of an actor. It is no wonder that so much is invested in finding and training potential spies. 

This paper is based on the book

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