Counterintelligence Trends

Russo-German
New Rules for a

Why People Spy: A Project
Slammer Report (U)

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Why People Spy: A Project Slammer Report

This article, drafted by Roland and Kenneth Rollins, US Army, Kathy Lockney, US Air Force, and Michael Gells, US Navy. Project Slammer is an ongoing Intelligence Community research program, under which convicted US spies have been extensively interviewed and psychologically tested since 1985. The executive committee consists of Intelligence Community psychiatrist, and Neil Hiler, US Air Force Office of Special Investigations, who manages the project.

Summary

Project Slammer has found that the motivation to spy is multifaceted and complex. Situational stresses (such as financial problems, work difficulties, and family conflicts), distortions in thinking, and personality traits contribute to a person’s decision to spy. All 25 Slammer subjects described multiple factors for spying, with anger/revenge cited most often. While money played a role in many cases, its significance as a motive varied greatly. Slammer subjects convinced themselves that espionage would solve their problems and that they could control the damage from and extent of their spying. Specific examples are cited to improve our understanding of why espionage occurs and to provide some clues as to how it might be prevented.

Introduction

To date, Project Slammer has interviewed and psychologically tested 25 convicted US spies. The results have helped counterintelligence, medical, and security officers better understand espionage behavior. This paper is based on interview segments in which spies were asked to describe their life circumstances at the time they began spying, their motivation for spying, and the thought processes that led them to spy. In most instances, spies directly stated their motives for spying, while in a few cases motivation was inferred from their statements. Slammer subjects were interested in telling their side of the story and at times...
rationalized their actions. While these rationalizations provide insights into the way spies think, they require that all statements by spies be viewed cautiously.¹

The Spies

Project Slammer has studied 25 spies to date, all of whom are male. Nineteen volunteered to spy and six were recruited. They were between the ages of 20 and 58 when they began spying (nine in their twenties, eight in their thirties, seven in their forties, and one in his fifties). Five subjects were government civilians, 15 were in the military, three worked in the private sector, and two were self-employed. Twenty-one had clearances at some time during their careers; 13 of these were cleared at the level of Top Secret or Sensitive Compartmented Information. Seventeen had clearances when they began spying, and six were ex-employees who had held clearances previously. None intended to spy when he was granted access. Two spied for more than five years, 12 spied between one and five years, four spied for less than one year, and seven were caught before they passed classified information. The intelligence services of the following countries handled the cases: USSR (11), East Germany (3), Poland (2), Vietnam (1), and South Africa (1). Five subjects attempted to contact Embassies or Consulates of the USSR but were caught before passing information, and three cases involved no foreign intelligence service. While the Slammer sample is small, it is similar to larger espionage samples in terms of age, education, duration of espionage, place of employment, and percentage who volunteered or were recruited.

Motivation

Project Slammer results indicate that espionage motivation involves a number of factors, including: situational stresses, distortions in thinking, and personality characteristics.² All subjects described more than

¹ Family and coworkers of spies were also interviewed when possible. Information from these interviews was not included in this article.

² Slammer subjects displayed elevated levels of narcissism, psychopathy, and immaturity. These personality traits are described in detail in previous Project Slammer reports.
one motive for spying and five subjects identified as many as four. As Table 1 shows, Staller subjects most often described anger, disaffection, or revenge as a motive for spying. While a majority of Staller subjects included financial need and/or greed among their motives, none claimed to be motivated solely by money. Other motives described by spies were adventure, ego, gratification, and identification/ideology as fully discussed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Number of Subjects Reporting Each Motive</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger/Disaffection/Revenge</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adventure/Thrills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Need</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ego/Self-Image</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gratification</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identification</td>
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Anger/disaffection/revenge. Anger, disaffection, or revenge played a role in 15 cases. These spies were angry with supervisors, employers, security and bureaucratic procedures, family members, and the US Government in general. In some cases, spying provided a way to strike back at the system for perceived insults to self-esteem (for example, being passed over for promotion).

3 The figures total more than 25 because all spies reported more than one motive.
Financial Need/Greed. Of the 17 subjects reporting a financial motive, seven were motivated by financial need, seven by greed, and three by both.

Adventure/Thrills. Eleven spies were at least partly motivated by adventure. Four were bored or disinterested in their work and attempted to impress others by concealing an “espionage operation.” Not surprisingly, adventure was most often accompanied by ego/self-image and greed as motives. One spy...

Ego/Self-Image. Nine subjects spied to enhance their egos or repair “wounds” to self-esteem. These spies were also more likely to report anger/vengeance or adventure as motives. They appeared to be overly sensitive to criticism and excessively concerned with maintaining an inflated self-image. For example, one military spy said...

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4 Seven of eight spies with prominent psychopathic traits said that they were primarily motivated to spy by money, either financial need or greed. None of the 15 spies displaying immature/inadequate traits said that their primary motivation was financial. They indicated they were motivated by ego, anger, ingratiation, and identification/ideology.
Ingratiation. Spies motivated by ingratiation attempted to please and/or win the approval of their foreign intelligence handlers. Five of these subjects were recruits, and the sixth was a volunteer who developed an emotional attachment to his handler. In that case, the handler provided...

Identification. No Slammer subjects were motivated by ideology in the classic sense. However, four spied for countries they viewed as "underdogs," appearing to identify with these countries because they too felt like underdogs who had been mistreated in life. Three of these four subjects were also motivated by anger/vengeance. One subject...

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Situational Stresses
As the above examples illustrate, Stammer subjects' motivation to spy often stemmed from situational stresses or personal problems. Most noted that the coincidence of problems with other factors, such as access and opportunity, played a critical role in their decision to commit espionage. These situational stresses were sometimes of the spies' own making (for example, due to character flaws, such as poor coping skills, impulsively, or impaired judgment), and sometimes due to unavoidable circumstances. Nineteen subjects were faced with at least one major life problem when they started spying. Eleven reported problems in more than one area, and six reported no problems. Table 2 shows the major problem situations faced by subjects at the time they started spying.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2 Problem Situations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Problems</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Financial. Financial problems arose from excessive personal spending, major family expenditures (such as college tuition), and failed business ventures. For example, one subject...

3 The figures total more than 25 because some spies reported more than one problem.
The degree of financial pressure experienced by subjects was not always related to the amount of debt. For example, one subject

Work problems reported by subjects included performance difficulties, dissatisfaction with assigned duties, and disgruntlement with employers. One subject

Family. Some subjects were faced with family problems when they started paying, including marital discord, separation from loved ones, and dysfunctional family situations.
Many spies were overwhelmed with multiple situational stresses and spied because they felt desperate and could see no other reasonable solution to their difficulties. They described their situations as a bewildering blur of conflicts, pressures, and emotions. They felt hopeless about resolving their problems, leading them to discount possible solutions and offers of help. One said:

Rationalizing the Crime

After deciding that espionage might solve their problems, Slammer subjects thought in ways that made it easier for them to carry out the act. They rationalized, blamed others, and denied the possible consequences of their actions. Some reasoned that they would sell secrets once, resolve their difficulties, and then stop. Many convinced themselves that they had no other option. They believed that they could minimize the damage by passing dated or “unimportant” information. A few spies began passing unclassified information and later shifted to classified. A number viewed espionage as a game. None believed that they had damaged national security or engaged in treasonous acts. One noted that the seriousness of his actions did not sink in until after he began passing secrets. Most came to realize that they could not stop without risking betrayal by their handlers or fellow spies. The following are examples of “spy thinking”:

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Conclusions

Spying is a complex behavior that is best understood by examining the actual and perceived situational stresses, thinking patterns, and personality traits of those who spy. The relative importance of these factors varies across cases, making it difficult to predict who will spy. In
some cases, situational stresses will be important, while in others personal characteristics may predominate. Other influences, such as substance abuse, can further complicate the picture by magnifying selected personality traits, creating additional stress, and impairing judgment. (Almost half of Slammer subjects used illegal drugs on a repetitive basis while they spied, and a few acknowledged that their judgment was impaired by alcohol or drugs.)

Project Slammer has examined espionage motivation from the perspective of spies who have already been convicted and have little to lose by cooperating. This methodology differs from that of other studies which rely on spies' statements during legal proceedings and open source information, including media coverage. Many of these studies contend that spies are primarily motivated by money. Project Slammer's assessments have suggested that it is overly simplistic (and inaccurate) to conclude that people spy for any one reason, especially money. Since more spies in this study cited anger and revenge as stronger motives than greed, spying may be better characterized as an angry than as a greedy act.

Prevention

While no measure will deter those intent on committing espionage, some steps can be taken to minimize the risk that employees will see espionage as the best or only way to solve their problems:
Project Slammer has provided a unique look at the complex factors that contribute to espionage. Using this information to refine our screening and management practices may help prevent and/or detect espionage in the future.

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