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The Psychology of Intent: Problems for Personnel Security and Counterintelligence Personnel

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Abstract. This article describes the psychology of intent as it applies to individuals who have violated some aspect of security prescriptions or proscriptions.

A security violation connotes success and failure. Failure because the violation was not prevented. Success because the violation was detected. With success and failure come the collection and analysis of data that may lead to increasing strengths and decreasing weaknesses of personnel security (PS) and counterintelligence (CI) programs. One crucial target of collection and analysis is the hypothesized intent of the security violator.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with deducing or inducing the violator's intent. (1) As with forensic attempts to establish an alleged or actual perpetrator's distinguishing of right from wrong at the time of some misbehavior, establishing intent has both philosophical and investigative difficulties. A significant philosophical conundrum is whether intent means anything, has ontological substance, and impels behavior beyond linguistic conventions seemingly possessed by PS and CI authorities. A significant investigative challenge is to collect relevant data that may have never or only briefly existed--a challenge that often becomes greater as time continues to increase from the moment or interlude of misbehavior. (2) Assuming (1) can be adequately handled, one still may face the situation in which the violator is not or was not ever aware of the intent impelling the violation. (3) Confronted with (2), investigator's seeking intent must then depend on the reports of others and of documentation creating a nomological net ever widening in its nodes of hypotheses and ever lengthening in its conceptual, associative, and often temporal distance from the violator's intent and misbehavior. (4) The violator, associates, and others may seem to be aware of something that seems to be the relevant intent. However, the social constructive nature of perception and memory within a continuously changing complex of conscious and unconscious cognitions, emotions, motives, and behaviors mitigates against intent being anything more than one or more of a number of cover stories to maintain some shreds of meaning in one's life.

The above difficulties of intent may lead to the dissatisfaction one may feel with the usual intentional suspects of (1) furthering the objectives of political ideology; (2) seeking of money; (3) avenging of some real or imagined slight; (4) expressing of sensation seeking, antisocial tendencies, or psychopathy; (5) succumbing to fatigue or transient cognitive and/or emotional dysfunction; or (6) responding to varieties of coercion. Stymied efforts to arrive at intent may even suggest that all such efforts--even seemingly successful ones--are mere exercises in projective identification. Attempts at invalidating others may only yield Sisyphean validation of the self. (See Helgeson, V.S., & Mickelson, K.D. (1995). Motives for social comparison. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 1200-1209; Jansz, J. (1996). Constructed motives. *Theory and Psychology*, 6, 471-484; Singer, M., & Halldorson, M. (1996). Constructing and validating motive bridging inferences. *Cognitive Psychology*, 30, 1-38; Stevens, L.E., & Fiske, S.T. (1995). Motivation and cognition in social life: A social survival perspective. *Social Cognition*, 13, 189-214; Winter, D.G., John, O.P., Stewart, A.J., et al. (1998). Traits and motives: Toward an integration of two traditions in personality research. *Psychological review*, 105, 230-250.)(Keywords: Counterintelligence, Intelligence, Intention, Personnel Security.)