

**Interviewing With An Intelligence Agency
(or, A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Fort Meade)**

By Ralph J. Perro (a pseudonym), November 2003

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ralph_j_perro@yahoo.com

Abstract: A first-person narrative of an applicant interviewing and going through the clearance process with the National Security Agency

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The Story

“Shhhh! There is a test in progress”

We had been shushed by the test proctor. And for the second time. This might not sound unusual, but I was at Friendship Annex (FANX) - the NSA facility near the Baltimore-Washington International (BWI) airport where applicant processing takes place -being interviewed by a division manager and several of his direct reports for a systems-development position. We were sitting in a large room directly behind the computerized testing facility where there were a gaggle of applicants taking foreign language tests. Naturally, I had assumed that the walls were all copper-lined to prevent inter-room electromagnetic emissions, slathered with Jello (on the inside), and insulated with bubble-wrap, with "Tunes of the Amish" piped-in to confuse any bug-planting Russkies. The walls would be watertight too, in case they need to *Dog The Hatches* - although that might only be applicable on things that float and sail. But in actuality, these were ordinary office-walls. Our voices had carried through as in any ordinary office setting. For the most part, this was a reasonably standard office building except for the guns, soldiers, barbed wire, and an abnormally high number of locked doors. Welcome to the National Security Agency.

It's a good sign when your hosts are making as much or more noise than you are, but I said *“Sorry, we'll keep it down.”* On the shelves in our room I spied several foreign language dictionaries and thought *“I am having way more fun than the people in the next room.”*

How Did I Get Here?

I was in a period of professional transition and I had a brainstorm that I wanted to work for the National Security Agency. It was a little bit of a lot of things: from the pre-NSA World War II crypto successes that I read in my youth (e.g., “AF is short of freshwater”) – being a history nut, recent developments in world-events (e.g., 9/11), to the simple fact that it is the largest intelligence agency in the world. And the agency has historically measured computing resources in acres. *Acres!* One can only imagine the top-secret high-tech synthesis of agricultural and computer science phraseology: *“Go out and data-mine the back-40. Harvest the intelligence. We had a problem with the combine on last night's batch job.”* Awesome!

But the agency had issues. A late 1999 external management review cited a technological gap with commercial practice, a broken Requirement & Delivery process, and poor stakeholder relations (with quotes such as *“when people say the NSA doesn't get it, they just talk louder”*). Too insular, and by inference, too in-bred. Ouch. From the report there were, no doubt, large numbers of smart people in the organization, but perhaps not enough people just crazy enough to believe they can break through the bureaucracy and crank up whatever they do a notch or ten.

“Hey, I can help with that!” I thought. *“Wouldn't it be cool to not only work there, but to help make it better!”*

And I even managed to get an interview.

But actually *getting* to the NSA isn't easy - in more ways than one.

To become an NSA employee, one must follow a process that can be as involved as the most invasive medical procedure ending in “-oscopy.” For experienced personnel, the first step is to have a pre-screen interview, which is usually conducted over the phone. If that goes well, an “operational interview” is scheduled with a hiring manager and other members of the team. Each staff position to be filled is referred to as a “billet” – in the private sector this would be referred to as a position, position requisition, etc. The hiring manager interviews several applicants to fill the billet, and if the interview goes well, a Conditional Job Offer (CJO) may be issued. The CJO will specify job-grade and salary, however it will not contain a start-date – because it's very much a conditional offer based on clearance.

Security forms are distributed and if the applicant decides to proceed the forms are returned. The forms go through “forms review” to check completeness and once the forms are deemed “complete” the action begins (timing note: even this reasonably simple step can take several weeks.) An important difference between the private sector and intelligence agencies is that multiple CJOs may be issued per billet. The first to finish the clearance process gets the job.

Some things can be explained but not completely appreciated unless they are personally experienced. Interviewing with the NSA is one of those experiences. Hunter S. Thompson probably said it best with this description of a different event: *“There is no way to understand the public reaction to the sight of a Freak smashing a coconut with a hammer on the hood of a white Cadillac in a Safeway parking lot unless you actually do it... and I tell you it’s tense.”*

Hunter was on his way to Las Vegas, and he was trying to convince his publisher for an extra-large expense account for some outrageous mescaline-enhanced adventures. Me? No drugs, thanks. But hopefully I would be off to Fort Meade, and I needed to convince the NSA that I was an OK Guy.

Where Are We Going?

But first, I needed to get to the interview. Like physically *be there*. The NSA’s travel agency booked me on a cross-country flight from San Francisco to JFK, with a 45-minute layover to catch a puddle-jumper to BWI. I re-read the itinerary: “45 minute layover at JFK.” It was an aggressive schedule for certain. And naturally, the initial flight was 44 minutes late taking off. Making my connection was *still* a mathematical possibility.

But nobody just lands and parks at JFK. When the wheels hit the tarmac on the way down there is the obligatory screeching-and-slowng-down period as is expected from any jet aircraft, but then only at JFK does the airliner truly double as an over-gown taxi as it *taxies* for about 20 minutes in an around the airport, past the Concorde with its swept-back wings, over several highways, past few more planes. And of course, periodically sitting still behind other planes, emulating Manhattan traffic.

After 5 hours in the air, losing 3 hours due to the coast-to-coast time-change, and a scenic plane-taxi tour, by the time I sprinted to the gate my flight to BWI had long since departed. Or maybe it was on the tarmac, they weren’t sure. Regardless, they said I couldn’t get on whether the plane was in the air or on the ground.

“Note to Self: should the need arise in the future, always double-check the NSA travel plans.” I had the biggest interview of my life the next morning, it was late, and I might be stuck in New York City.

So I smiled as wide as I could and dropped my voice an octave or two and said *“I just missed my connection. I need to get anywhere near Washington D.C. by tonight. I’ll take care of the rest.”* I gave her a knowing nod on the last part, because as far as I was concerned parachuting was an option. The airline employee could also see that I had wheels on the bottom of my overnight bag and I wasn’t afraid to use them. So she handed me a ticket and said *“Get on that plane.”*

I had no idea where I was going but I was flying somewhere. And I almost missed *that* flight because they were in the process of closing the gates. I was the last person to get on the plane. Once seated, I had to turn to the passenger next to me - a tourist from Finland - and ask *“Say...where is this plane going to land?”*

The answer: Reagan National.

So I took a 35-mile cab ride from Reagan to the hotel near BWI for \$60 after shopping around for the best price (these were *my* tax dollars at work and I had every intention of expensing this unexpected leg of the trip).

Whew. But I got there.

Kiitos to my Finnish co-passenger. But rest assured, we Americans aren’t normally this confused when we travel.

Agents In Training?

Even before I flew out for my operational interview, secrecy was a part of the program – a hallmark of any intelligence agency, and particularly the NSA. When I called the travel agency to schedule my flight, I was told that when I called I should not identify myself as a NSA applicant on the phone, but by a different acronym. Let's say "XYZ applicant" for the sake of discussion. And when I flew out for my interview, all I had was a department code number. I had absolutely no idea what the department did. And in the morning of the interview, all the applicants (for all types of positions) were handed temporary badges and told very solemnly to shield this badge from prying eyes, and not advertise that we were interviewing with the NSA.

"Now this is what interviewing with an intelligence agency is supposed to be like!" I thought.

But large enterprises are comprised of individuals, and as individuals can be as human as the next, a few parts of the interview process were unintentionally more *Get Smart* than *Mission: Impossible*. For example, after calling up and booking my hotel and flight giving the alias organization name over the phone, my confirmation email stated my room-type as "NSA" in clear-text. A minor oops.

At the hotel, the hostess greeted every person coming to breakfast with the question "*Are you an XYZ applicant?*" because she needed to know if she should charge for fruit & cereal (which were free for the applicants). By itself, it doesn't seem that funny unless one were to sit back in the corner of the dining room watching 20 or so applicants nervously entering for breakfast responding with a tentative "yes" as if the hostess was going to rip off her disguise and reveal herself to be in the employ of the NSA. *The secret tunnel to Fort Meade is located behind the waffle-maker, single-file please.*

Periodically, businessmen would enter, shake their heads at the "applicant" question, and state that they just wanted coffee.

Concurrent with my hotel and plane scheduling, when I received a confirming email of my interview schedule the email stated 4 times I should be at FANX at 7:30am. Thus, I planned my arrival at the requested time. However, the email *also* stated that my interview started at 12:30pm (which I did think was odd). Still, I arrived at 7:30am because, on a percentage basis, the confirming email stated "7:30am" 4 times more often than my actual interview time of "12:30pm". When I arrived, after passing through the metal-detector, and swiping my badge and punching my security code as I went through the turnstile, I was told that I was indeed *really early* but I could have a cup of tea if I liked. The tea-maker in the waiting-area of FANX was a machine where the user placed plastic cartridges in a black chamber that swung out when a button was pressed. At least I think it was automated, and it definitely looked like it was from the future. While my tea brewed, I gazed around the room. Through the 1-way glass on the other side of the room I could see the parking lot (and the razor wire beyond), and the white wall to the right of the window held 3' x 4' collages of the Washington, DC. area. The royal blue and white wall I was standing in front of was decorated with signs of classic NSA professions (e.g., "language", "signals intelligence", "mathematics") set on black backgrounds. The profession-text was white and capitalized, but compensated stylistically, as I recall, by being set on a 15-degree angle. The mathematics sign had equations and symbols for effect – although no doubt declassified. Behind me, next to the coat rack, was a recruitment poster that said "For your eyes only..." When my tea was finished I realized it was indeed from the future: a future where over-steeped, tepid, tea was freely available from quasi-futuristic machines. I was thirsty, so I quaffed it. I hoped that my future would be more appealing.

On my return trip on the hotel shuttle I managed to hide my temporary badge from a couple of tired airline pilots.

A Leap of Faith

When I did have my operational interview, I was impressed. Four people interviewed me at the same time, which I very much preferred, as the interviewers could play off each other's questions and not repeat each other. Likewise, I got to speak to all of them at the same time. Nothing is worse than having 4 back-to-back 1-hour interviews with each interviewer asking the same questions as the previous, and in fact, this was quite the opposite. They asked thoughtful, probing questions, and they were, above all, nice people.

At the end of the day, they were prepared to make a CJO. In *one* day? Is this *my* government? I couldn't believe it. In addition, the interview went well enough that the division manager said he was going to hold the position for me and not interview anybody else for the billet, clearance pending, of course.

It's been said that working at the NSA is a leap of faith. So I leaped. I returned my carefully completed forms detailing the last 10 years of my existence on this planet, along with a notarized fingerprint card.

One point that was oddly reassuring was submitting the expense check for my interview. The expense forms were photocopies of photocopies of photocopies of forms originally produced in the late 70's or early 80's, stapled in a wad of paperwork to my travel orders, and paper-clipped (and probably additionally stapled) to a return envelope. The address on the envelope was something big and vacuous like "PO Box 123456789, Savage Road, Fort Meade." And *Savage* road? Was that *really* necessary? I remember chuckling "*It'll be 6 months before I see this money*" when I mailed it. At the same time, I also turned in an expense report for my contracting gig. That expense form was a fancy Excel spreadsheet with auto-calc-this and auto-sum-that.

Which expense check got paid first? Take a guess. The NSA paid first. The NSA expense process was creaky, but mostly functional.

Me (An Interlude)

The first car I bought was a Plymouth Acclaim. An authentic Iacocan K-car. Functional but affordable. The air-conditioner broke twice, and it leaked rainwater on the passenger side. Sure, my friends made fun of it, but I loved it. It was *my* car. American, and proud of it! It was the ultimate in automotive cognitive dissonance. Perhaps I was pre-destined for government work and didn't realize it at the time.

I'd consider myself a hard working individual, and a reasonably level-headed Midwestern guy. Goal setting, achieving, stuff like that. I earned my master's part-time over 3 ½ years while working full-time. Professionally, I have a decade of experience that includes mission-critical enterprise systems development at a Fortune 500 company, as well as software development work in Silicon Valley. I absolutely make no claims about being the next Don Knuth (or even his next *cousin*, professionally speaking), but I have a respectable resume.

I never smashed anyone's mailbox when I was kid, nor did I kick anyone's dog. Honesty es mi nombre, or at least the middle one. Have I been a smartass at least once in my life? Yes. But that's not a crime, only a function of relatively infrequent poor judgement, and it's addressed with experience and maturity.

Lest the reader think a too-rosy and goodie-goodie picture is being painted, honesty combined with a forward style of communication cuts both ways. As electricity can be used to power kitchen appliances for dinner, it can also shock the bejeezus out of people. These attributes, combined with the willingness to state things that I feel need to be said, means that a few extra amps are occasionally delivered with the metaphorical turkey tetrazini. I do strive to be constructive, though, and I've found that honest direct communication works both professionally and personally much better than hidden agendas and BS, and direct-ness is preferred by most.

I've never been convicted - let alone arrested - of any misdemeanor or felony, I don't do drugs, and I don't even have any points on my driver's license (knock on wood). Stable marriage, couple of kids. Get along with the neighbors, etc.

I thought "*Hey, I'm a decent person. Clearance should be pretty straightforward. What could go wrong?*"

P.J. O'Rourke posed the following question in his book *Parliament of Whores*: "*Our Government: What the f#ck do they do all day, and why does it cost so godd@mned much money?*"

The security clearance process is a partial answer to that question, and in-turn the government ponders a similar question about you.

(Note: P.J. O'Rourke used real curses. The reader is free to read them as proxies or the actual profanity depending on the reader's exposure to truck stops, professional football games, or Quentin Tarantino films. Or the book).

Psychological Exam

What Does My Mother Have To Do With National Security?

When I flew in for my operational interview I had lunch with another applicant in an NSA cafeteria. The other applicant was an engineering student from a state university in the Midwest and was interviewing for an internship. He had already had his psychological (psych) exam on a previous visit and was back for more processing. So I asked him what the psych-exam was like in-between bites of my declassified pizza while I alternated glances across to my lunch-partner, down to my off-white cafeteria tray emblazoned with the National Security Agency emblem, and up at the signs hung from the ceiling that said “*SHHH! No Work Talk!*,” or some equivalent. His reaction was hard to misinterpret: a cocked head, a look off into the distance, and an answer that trailed off at the end. “*Kinda strange...*” he said. “*They asked about how I got along with my mother... and stuff like that.*” It was a description of a process that, while not necessarily painful, was a tad uncomfortable and bewildering. It was also described as a black-hole evaluation process, where the applicant reveals all sorts of information but receives very little feedback (Evaluation Hawking Radiation?), save for “continue” or “you’re done.”

I think the single-most unnerving part is that the applicant has little idea *how* they are being evaluated. In a language exam, it’s vocabulary, verb conjugation, and competence in written and verbal communication, etc. In computer science, it’s knowledge of core data structures, algorithms, and implementations. Psychology? Are they evaluating my sanity? What’s going on here?

To the psychologically unwashed (me at the time), crazy people were... *Crazy*. Crazy people jump on tables and cluck like chickens. Those people are crazy. Crazy people believe that they are receiving Special Orders from Outer Space. Crazy people wear tin-foil, a lot of it, and badly. People who are habitually violent are crazy. I wasn’t crazy. No way. That’s about all I knew of psychology. And how do they test craziness? Crazometers?

But the psychological examination process *does* have a structured collection process. Here’s what happens:

First, a questionnaire approximately 10 pages in length is distributed to each applicant to fill out while waiting in the lobby. The applicants are given about 30 minutes to fill them out by hand.

Next, applicants will take a computerized psychological exam of 500+ true/false questions. I recall mine having about 567 questions. I am not certain whether the test is fixed in length, or if more questions get added based on certain conditions in test-answers, so consider “567” one of many possible data-points. However, “about 500” seems to be a consistent response from others I’ve spoken with.

While the applicants are in the testing facility taking the test (which can take anywhere from 1.5 to 2.5 hours), the psychologists are reviewing the handwritten answers and highlighting anything that looks “interesting.”

Finally, there is a 1:1 interview with a psychologist to review the test results and the handwritten portion.

The Handwritten Questionnaire

The handwritten questionnaire asks for a lot of information already supplied on the security forms, such as:

Name, age, education, marital status, children (if any), etc.

The more interesting questions were (as best I can recall):

- Describe the relationship to your mother
- Describe the relationship to your father
- Describe your parent’s relationship to each other

- Have you ever had psychological counseling? (when/how long, etc.)
- Have any relatives ever had psychological counseling?
- Have you ever attempted suicide?
- Have you ever had a substance abuse problem?
- Do you drink? If so, how many drinks per week? per day?
- When was the first time you drank alcohol?

- Have you ever had interpersonal issues at work? (e.g., work relationships)
- Have you ever had disciplinary issues at school/military?
- Have you ever been convicted of a misdemeanor/felony?
- Have you ever been questioned by the police/authorities? (N.B., this would appear to be the catch-all, in case someone wasn't *convicted*)
- Do you have any relatives that were in trouble with police/authorities?
- Have you ever taken something that was not yours? (This may have been worded as something slightly different, but this was the intent)
- Have you ever committed computer abuse? (N.B.: whether deliberate or not, I recall the term 'abuse' being left unspecified, ostensibly leaving the door open for all sorts of self-reporting ranging from checking personal email at work, to having used Napster/Morpheus etc., to writing viruses, hacking websites and stealing credit cards numbers.)

- Have you ever been the victim of a violent crime?

- Have you ever clucked like a chicken? If so, did you scratch backward or forward?
- Describe your relationships to chickens.

The last page had about 20 sentences for the applicant to complete. Some that I remember were...

- Men should ____
- Women should ____
- I get angry when/because ____
- Chickens should ____

Given the theme, I would hazard a guess that the other sentences were ones that touched on potentially strong emotional reactions like "I most regret," "If I only could", "I won't" and things like that.

The Computerized Test

As close as I can remember, these were some of the actual questions on the test. (true/false)

- I would like the job of a forest ranger
 - I hear voices in my head
 - I read the crime reports in the newspaper
 - I have a mortal fear of earthquakes
 - I have neck/hand pain
 - I usually know what's going on (with my circle of friends)
 - People are out to get me
 - I would like the job of a librarian/florist (I can't remember which one it was, and it might have been both)
 - I often feel that I can't get out of bed
 - If someone has their possessions stolen from their unlocked car they had it coming.
 - I like/enjoy children
- "Animal-relationship"-type questions (e.g., "I enjoy animals", "I don't enjoy animals", "I like hurting animals", "It bothers me when I hear about animals getting hurt" etc.)
- I am totally insane and like to stand on tables and cluck like a chicken

A few previous questions might *not* have actually been on the exam or the handwritten portion, but you get the point. The questions went on and on.

The Interview

The psychological interview was conducted in the psychologist's office. It lasted about 15 or 20 minutes and felt somewhat stiff. Think of a really serious doctor visit but there's no couch like the stereotypical psychiatrist on TV and the lights are not dimmed and absent is a soothing *Enya* CD filling the room from a Bose-wave stereo placed discreetly behind a large potted plant. The psychologist and I sat looking at each other from across the his wooden desk, while he lobbed personal questions across in monotone and I volleyed back honest-and-succinct personal answers.

The interview began with the psychologist asking me to confirm the demographic information on the handwritten psychological forms (e.g., name, education, age, etc.).

Regarding "stiff":

Psychologist: "What is your name?"

(Psychologist glances up from other side of a big desk while holding notepad and applicant's handwritten forms)

Applicant: "John Doe."

(Psychologist looks down and scribbles answers on notepad)

Wash. Rinse. Repeat. The entire interview was pretty much like this.

The psychologist then presented a printout of the results of the 500+ test questions. A graph was briefly placed in front of me and stated "*Based on the test results, you're low to medium risk.*" And then he circled some lines on the graph and made a few brief summary statements on my personality and emotional whatever. He may have also told me that I was a Cocker Spaniel based on the test results, but most of my brain was trying to process what exactly the X and Y axis in the graph had to do with the price of the paper clip and my choice in dog food. Woof.

I left thinking "*Well, I'm not really sure how that went. Kinda strange...*"

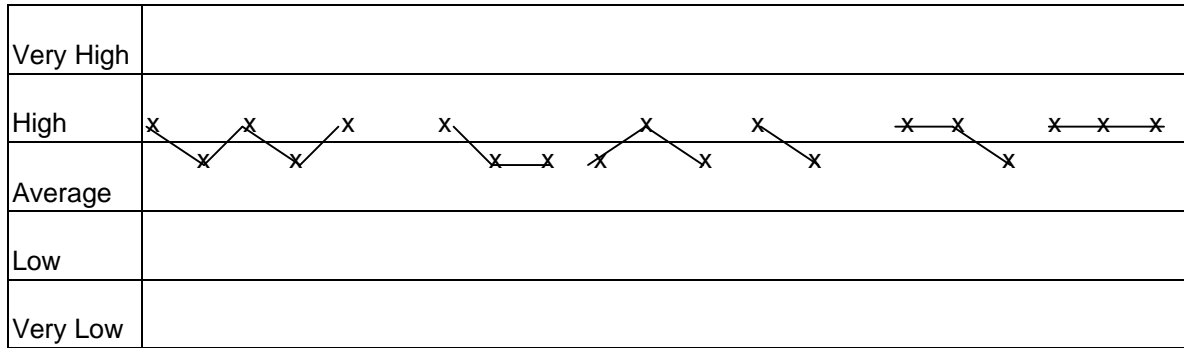
Analysis (or "What, Me Worried?")

What appears to be never explained to the candidate is the method of evaluation. And it remained a mystery to me for some time. Until I saw The Picture.

Here's how it happened... One of the favorite outings I have with my kids is to go to our favorite pizza joint and then visit the university medical bookstore a block down the street. The bookstore contains all sorts of medical equipment, clothing, books, models, and other goodies. A pipe dream of mine is to put on an in-store puppet show with the Skeleton, the Giant Eyeball, and the Brain. What *fun* that would be! But shopping decorum – and the hefty model pricetags – has so far prevented such theatre from taking place, so we have to admire-without-touching, and then move onto the tuning forks and rubber knee-whappers (aka Neural Reflex Hammers) which were fair game for hands-on enjoyment.

But one day I browsed through the sizable stack of Psychology texts. And then I saw it:

N E O A C N1 N2 n.. E1 E2 e.. O1 O2 o.. A1 A2 a.. C1 C2 c..



It looked a lot like the type of picture I saw in the office. But what does it mean?

It was a graphical representation of something called the *Five Factor Model of Personality*. *Whoa!!* I stood there dumbfounded, as if I had suddenly acquired the power to converse with whales like Aquaman or read Sanskrit like... well, someone that reads Sanskrit. It was an “*Ah-Ha!*” moment, but not in the style of the similarly-named 80’s Euro-band with Fabulous Hair, this was *actual understanding*.

Ahhhhhhhhh-HA!

Each of the computerized test questions maps to one of the “Five Factors”: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Those are the bold N, E, O, A, C letters in the upper left-hand corner, and below each of these letters is the overall quasi-numerical ranking for that Factor. The rest of the letters across the top are the facets for each factor, called respectively N1, N2, E1, E2, etc. Below each facet is a data-point as well. It’s possible a percentage of the test questions are “chaff” and are not scored, however, the principle still remains the same. Specifically, the each test question maps to a facet within a Factor, and the overall Factor rating is based – I assume – on the average of the Factor’s facets.

| Factor | Facets | “Too High” Issues | “Too Low” Issues |
|---|--|---|---|
| NEUROTICISM (N) Level of emotional adjustment and instability | Anxiety (N1) Angry Hostility (N2) Depression (N3) Self-consciousness (N4) Impulsiveness (N5) Vulnerability (N6) | Chronic negative affect, irritability, anger, dejection, difficulty inhibiting impulses, unrealistic expectations, difficulty dealing with stress | Lacks appropriate concern for potential problems in health or social adjustment, emotional blandness |
| EXTRAVERSION (E) Quantity and intensity of preferred interpersonal interactions | Warmth (E1) Gregariousness (E2) Assertiveness (E3) Activity (E4) Excitement Seeking (E5) Positive Emotions (E6) | Talks excessively, inappropriate self-disclosure, inability to spend time alone, attention seeking, overly dramatic | Social isolation, lacks joy and zest for life, shy, reluctant to assert |
| OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE (O) Level of active seeking and appreciation of experiences for their own sake. | Fantasy (O1) Aesthetics (O2) Feelings (O3) Actions (O4) Ideas (O5) Values (O6) | Preoccupied with fantasy and daydreaming, lacks practicality, eccentric thinking, social rebelliousness that can interfere with vocation | Difficulty adapting to social or personal change, shows a low tolerance or understanding for different points of view, insensitive to art and beauty, excessively conforms to authority |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>AGREEABLENESS (A)</p> <p>The kind of interactions that a person prefers along a continuum of compassion to antagonism.</p> | <p>Trust (A1) Straightforwardness (A2) Altruism (A3) Compliance (A4) Modesty (A5) Tender-Mindedness (A6)</p> | <p>Gullible, indiscriminant trust of others, excessive candor and generosity to the detriment of self-interest, easily taken advantage of.</p> | <p>Cynical and paranoid thinking, inability to trust friends, is exploitative and manipulative, rude and inconsiderate manner alienates friends, inflated and grandiose sense of self, arrogant</p> |
| <p>CONSCIENTIOUSNESS (C)</p> <p>Degree of organization, persistence, and motivation in goal-oriented behavior</p> | <p>Competence (C1) Order (C2) Dutifulness (C3) Achievement Striving (C4) Self-Discipline (C5) Deliberation (C6)</p> | <p>Overachieves, workaholic to the exclusion of family, social & personal interests, compulsive, rigid, over-scrupulousness</p> | <p>Underachieves, does not fulfil intellectual or artistic potential, poor academic record, disregards rules and responsibilities, lacking in self-discipline</p> |

The handwritten portion bolsters or augments the model constructed from the computerized test. With respect to this portion some relevant hypotheses are:

- Applicants that have parents where the parent-child relationship was coercive and manipulative may have a tendency to be coercive and manipulative in relationships themselves.
- Applicants whose parent’s relationship (i.e., the parents to each other) is cool and distant may be themselves withdrawn and may have trouble forming emotional attachments.
- Those that start drinking early (and often) are risk-takers and may have a poor self image
- Those that are in a lot of fights or had trouble with the law may be low in A, or have a lot of unresolved anger (high N).
- Those that have persistent workplace issues may be too high in C or too low in A

The parent-child relationship is complex and has filled many a psychology book. I don’t pretend to do it justice with just a few bullet points, but if the reader find’s themselves in such an interview consider all replies in the context of the model, likewise one’s background.

Balance is probably an important point to bring up. Just because somebody is introverted (Low E), or conscientious (High C) doesn’t mean they have terminal issues. Someone slightly anxious doesn’t necessarily need a lifetime supply of extra-strength Prozac. But *excessive* anything seems to be the trigger, and reasonable one, for discussion – even NSA aside.

In terms of interpretation, no single question should mark an applicant as one thing or another. An example from my own experience was the question about “liking children.” As a parent, I checked “true” without thinking about it. But in the lobby after the test but before the interviews, I heard a few college-aged male applicants discussing whether if checking “true” would mark them in a category for a potential pedophile! The person who said that might have been over-thinking a bit, but what is important from what I’ve read is the *pattern* of answers, not necessarily any specific answer.

Should the reader ever find themselves in a similar interview, they would do well to remember the model in which they were being evaluated, which is not necessarily based on professional experience (i.e., work) but how one reacts to the experience. Be very careful about what you say, but relax! (if that makes any sense)

Crazy people are still Crazy, but there are far more shades to crazy than I realized. And according to the texts, it would seem that apparently *everybody* is crazy... it just depends on what type of crazy you’re looking for.

On that note, Rosenhan's 1973 study *On Being Sane In Insane Places* is worth a mention. 8 pseudo-patients checked themselves into 12 hospitals complaining of faux psychiatric problems, and only once was admission refused. Once admitted, they acted "normally" with the hopes of quickly being released. The study found that while several patients and visitors got wise to the fact they were faking, no pseudo-patient was *ever* diagnosed as being "sane" by the staff, and quite a few normal behaviors were cited as being deviant. While it shouldn't be taken as a general condemnation of psychiatry, it *is* a call for caution on looking for Crazy and expecting it everywhere. *Anyone* can become institutionalized. In this case it was the staff.

Check out the appendix for even more detail on testing Crazy.

Polygraph

The Interview

The polygraph examination was conducted in a small locked room. At the NSA, it is done in the context of a hallway of locked rooms, each with a little sign that says "interview in process" that can be flipped out near the top of the door. It would appear to be the intelligence version of a hotel's "do not disturb." A polygraph hotel, in this case.

I sat across from the examiner (also called a polygrapher) in a sturdy black textured chair (at least mine was like this – who knows how often they change the furniture). The arms of the chair were extra-wide and flat to accommodate the arms being stretched out and the palms being placed flat. The chair felt heavy, had no wheels and did not swivel. Like the psychological interview, the examiner is also sitting behind a desk, except in this case it was a regular cheap-o office desk. Also, unlike the psych-interview it wasn't the examiner's full-time office.

The examiner first asked "*Do you know how a polygraph works?*" He then explained that it measured certain physiological metrics such as blood pressure, breathing, and skin response. He then explained that it measures the body's "fight or flight" response when the body responds to a lie. From a process perspective, he explained that he will not be the one making the final determination but rather "quality control" will review all of the polygraphs and make a determination.

Before being hooked up to the machine, the he reviewed my security forms, question by question, with me. "*Is your name John Doe?*" "*Is this your current address?*" If it's about being questioned by the police, he asks for specific incidents. Drug use? How many times, smoked-but-not-inhaled, and when, etc. And he seemed to particularly be interested in drug questions. Buy it? Sell it? Transport it? Collate it? Stare at it? Stack it? Pack it? Train-track it?

The stated purpose of this preparatory interview is two-fold:

- reduce question ambiguity for the applicant on the polygraph test
- collect additional information on the applicant

Then the polygraph test starts.

My chair is rotated 90 degrees to the right to face the door. All I remember is that it was a really, really plain door. I'm not in the habit of staring at doors for long periods of time, but if I would begin such a habit this portal would not be at the top of the list. The examiner was now on my left, approximately at 8:00 (i.e., if 12:00 is directly ahead). Sensors are placed on my right hand (pointer and middle-finger), and two tubes are placed across my torso – one across the chest and another on the diaphragm. A blood-pressure cuff is attached to my left arm.

The polygraph test is divided into two sections: counter-intelligence and lifestyle. Each section was repeated four times. Counter-intelligence questions included whether I had ever had a security clearance before, ever passed confidential information to another party, ever worked for a foreign intelligence agency, etc. Lifestyle basically includes the information from the applicant's security forms (e.g., "*were you born in the state of XXX?*", "*is your name John Doe?*")

My instructions were to keep my feet flat on the floor, and basically don't move because that would screw up the test.

During the first round of my counter-intelligence questioning (which was the first of the two sections) my anxiety was through the roof. I had read about the NSA's historically invasive polygraph questioning in Bamford's *Body of Secrets*, and I was a bit on-edge. It must be said, though, that I found the pre-test interview much more straightforward than I had expected. It was pretty much the information on the security forms and without any EPQs (embarrassing personal questions).

After getting hooked up, examiner's instruction that I kept repeating in my head was "*don't move, because that could screw up the test.*" I dutifully kept still. I must have had a "dentist's chair response" because after the first round of questioning the examiner said "*look, something is really wrong here. You didn't breathe for about 20 seconds.*" To which I responded, quite truthfully, "*but you told me to stay still!*"

So then I concentrated on regular breathing and *also* not moving.

I didn't have any other advice from the examiner other than to be told that I was the most nervous person he had ever seen in the chair. And please try to relax. While I appreciated his candor, *that* didn't calm me down but I took his comment at face value.

At the end of the examination, he left the room for several minutes to talk to someone (either his supervisor or someone in "quality control" – the group that will make the actual determination on the applicant's chart).

While he said I didn't have any "specific responses" on any questions indicating "deception," I was clearly more nervous than what he wanted to see, and asked me if there was anything else I would like to "*get off my chest or if anything else was eating my confidence.*" I said "*other than the fact that I'm having a polygraph, no.*"

The whole thing (pre-interview, plus hook-up) took somewhere between 2 to 2.5 hours.

Analysis (or, "Lying? Nervous? Indigestion?")

What I learned after I began reading about the polygraph was that both of my actions – to be very still and not breathe (to satisfy the requirement of not moving), and breathing extremely slowly (to breathe but in a relaxed way and still not move) – are both considered polygraph countermeasures. *Doh!* The average individual breathes 13 to 18 times per minute, and breathing either over or under those limits can be viewed in a negative light by the examiner.

I was so clueless about how the polygraph worked (and I mean *really* worked) and I was also largely oblivious as to how my actions to address my anxiety – and my earnest attempt to cooperate - were being interpreted by the examiner. And in the back of my mind I think that I actually *believed* that machine was imbued with Special Powers. Why, I don't know. Chalk it up to nerves.

There is an urban legend about cops putting a colander on a suspect's head and attaching a wire to a copy machine where it would magically print out "He's Lying" whenever they thought they heard something fishy. I'm not *that* stupid, but I would estimate that it is a common belief that if people actively learn about the polygraph, they must be "cheating," or have a desire to do same. After all, it's a *Lie Detector*, isn't it?

Information From The Field

In the spirit of the scientific method, after my exam I searched for information that explained how polygraphs work, and also for information both "pro" and "against" their effectiveness and usage. I'm sure that the majority of polygraph examiners are hard-working, tax-paying, jury-duty-serving, home-and-yard-maintaining citizens, and the business of verifying an applicant's background is very serious indeed. But there is a great deal written about the polygraph and very little of it supports its usage from a scientific standpoint. Its effectiveness in an exam is

significantly (and so far, intractably) linked to the examiner's performance, many an applicant's belief in the infallibility of the machine, and the fact that the machine scares the crap out of people and gets them to talk.

But its record in counter-intelligence is unfortunately disappointing. A statistic frequently cited is that no spy has ever been caught by a polygraph examination.

An issue even larger than not necessarily being a deterrent to espionage is the result of "false positives" cast upon innocent examinees. In addition, there exists the potential (I should stress *potential*) for abuse or manipulation by the examiner, and the result-interpretation is additionally subjective.

One TES (Test for Espionage and Sabotage) laboratory experiment done at the Department of Defense Polygraph Institute showed an average false-positive rate of approximately 9.4%. It should be noted that was a laboratory experiment, and the persons in the study had nothing to lose (e.g., their jobs). It is a reasonable expectation that the false-positives would be higher in the field due to increased anxiety of the participants. The National Academy of Sciences 2002 report on the polygraph states that confidence in a 90% accuracy rate is "not warranted" in practical applications, and "*many committee members would place this upper bound considerably lower.*"

A 1997 statistic of FBI pre-employment applicants showed a 20% failure rate (i.e., the applicants were "determined to be withholding pertinent information"). A statistic from 2002 showed a failure rate of 50%. And according to "The Lie Behind The Lie Detector" the consequences of failure are quite severe: the applicant is finished. A 50% failure rate? I found this distressing because the examinees are potential FBI *employees who already received CJO's*, not random individuals from the street or from the FBI's own Most Wanted List.

The examiner has a variety of techniques at their disposal to elicit confessions, the first of which will be convincing the examinee of the machine's infallibility, and potentially bluffing, and/or "jacking-up" (stimulating and over-stimulating) an applicant.

In defense of the examiner, it's not like he did anything outrageous like threaten to bite the head off a parakeet if he thought I was lying, or when he was asking me the drug questions like putting a huge water bong in the middle of the table asking "*I can't remember how this thing works, can you help me?*" with the intent of catching the one-toke-over-the-line applicant unawares. Although he *did* say that 80% to 90% of the applicants had experimental drug usage in their background. Hmm... Maybe that bong stunt *isn't* so outrageous. But anyway, there are less outrageous things that can still affect an exam. One person informed me that on their last NSA polygraph that the examiner started off the interview by saying: "*If you're telling the truth I'm your best friend. If you're lying I'm your worst enemy.*" This was, at best, a gratuitous use of the examiner's position. And in the let's-see-what-kind-of-blip-we-can-put-on-a-chart category, another told me that it was not uncommon for the examiner to ask in a loud voice "*AND NOW, THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION ON THE EXAM...*" What was important, I'm told, was not the actual answer but how one reacted.

Intelligence agencies certainly have an affinity to the polygraph machine, though. "The Lie Behind The Lie Detector" cites that in 1993 the NSA wrote to the White House "*over 95% of the information the NSA develops on individuals who do not meet federal security guidelines is derived via [voluntary admissions from] the polygraph process.*" And the Joint Security Commission noted in a 1994 report content that many polygraph proponents are "*content that as long as the polygraph elicits admissions to screen out unsuitable applicants and actual security risks, the questions about the polygraph's validity remain academic.*"

Additionally, as has been cited by a former CIA polygrapher (and it would appear to be reasonable to make as a base-assumption for all polygraphers) "*our performance is evaluated on the number of admissions we obtain and the amount of information developed from those we test.*" Quite literally, it is an examiner's job to get the interviewee to talk.

I would highly recommend the reader check out at least the executive summary of the 2002 National Academy of Science's 420-page report on the polygraph, which casts the machine's usage for pre-employment screening in an unfavorable light based on its scientific underpinnings. Likewise the paper "The Lie Behind The Lie Detector" available from antipolygraph.org. It's all interesting, but especially the part on Countermeasures (e.g., how "guilty"

and “truthful” people are expected to act, mind games the examiner may play, breathing and cardio/electrical countermeasures, etc.) Lastly, the DoD’s Polygraph Institute’s manual on interrogation is worth a scan.

Philosophically, I can’t say that I support the use of countermeasures because using deception in a process based upon inconclusive science won’t *really* keep America safer or make it a better place to live. But should the reader ever find themselves in a position to be polygraphed, I *do* think that it would be responsible to understand the common interrogation techniques and also response techniques that might be construed as potentially being deceptive.

Background Investigation

The background investigation is where investigators will pore over the applicant’s security forms and personally verify the authenticity of the information provided. This investigation started after the polygraph and psychological examination.

Friends, former managers, neighbors... everything is fair game. As it probably should be for an investigation at this level.

I had alerted nearly everybody on my forms that an investigator might be coming around so that nobody would think I did anything wrong or was in trouble. I subsequently got progress reports from said individuals when investigators stopped by.

Our neighbors were interviewed for approximately 10 minutes apiece (so they tell me, it’s not like I was hiding in the bushes eavesdropping.)

The most common questions were...

- How long have you known him? Describe the relationship. How often do you see him?
- Is he happily married? Any issues that you know of?
- Does he gamble? Do drugs? Have a drinking problem? Any strange behavior lately?
- Would you consider him trustworthy?
- Does he know any foreign nationals? Who? How often does he see them?
- Can you provide a name (or two) of someone that might also think this way?

Of the 5 neighboring houses in our cul-de-sac, the local investigator stopped by 4 of them for a chat.

Interviews with work-relations (e.g., former managers) were a bit longer. I’m told that the interviews were anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes.

The background investigation collection-phase is capped with a Security Interview with the applicant. I was working at home one day and someone identifying themselves as a DoD investigator called and said “*mind if I come over in an hour?*” I said “*sure.*”

The investigator invited me into her tan Cadillac, her “office” as she called it. She sat in the driver’s seat, and I sat in the passenger’s seat. I was expecting a K-car (like the K-car I used to have), but the security interview subsequently commenced in a General Motor’s luxury automobile at the end of my driveway.

We exchanged morning pleasantries, and I asked “*how do you know it’s really me?*” as I tried to display as many non-verbal clues that I was really joking and not being deceptive. The investigator answered “*We know. I’ve been here before. Now go get me two forms of ID.*” So I got out of the car and ran into the house and came back with my driver’s license and passport.

The security interview is basically like a polygraph examination without a polygraph, and it must have taken at least 2 hours. The investigator reviews all the information I provided in the forms, plus confirms any clarifications I

stated in the polygraph examination, and then ostensibly anything else that turns up, either in the investigation or in Local or National Agency Check with authorities (e.g., local police or FBI). The investigator also showed me a copy of my credit report and asked me to individually identify each card & account on the report. It was actually quite impressive, as I had never seen a copy of my own credit report. It even had the Banana Republic card I used exactly one time to get a 15% in-store discount on a shirt 3 years earlier (it's still in style, *honest!*)

The interview-in-a-sedan was physically awkward. The natural inclination of a body when sitting in the front-seat of an automobile is to sit back and look through the windshield. However, if I kept my eyes to the front the investigator would be 90 degrees to my left ear and that would probably look *really* deceptive. But if I kept my shoulders to the seat and only turned my head to the left I would probably look like a freak, if not an uncomfortable freak. So I recall opting for rotating my body about 45 degrees counter-clockwise to the left, with my left elbow resting on the top of my seat, but not extended that my arm reached over to *her* seat, lest I look *too* friendly.

The investigator had a stack of papers on her lap and in her hands. She wrote on a pad of paper braced firmly against the steering wheel, and I wondered if one of my responses was going to cause her to press a little too hard and lay on the horn (like an *automotive* polygraph, where the stress levels are measured in decibels). The tempo of the interview was in some ways like the psychological exam in that she was unable to maintain eye contact for very long, but different in that I was only about 18 inches from the questioner when answering.

(investigator's head and eyes are forward reading the question) "*is this your current residence?*"

(investigator's head then turns 90 degrees to the right to see my response)

The questions were mostly the same as the polygraph examination, but with a few new ones:

"*Have I ever denied anyone their civil rights?*" No. But the mind races: if I did, which ones? The 6th Amendment – The right to fair and speedy public trial? The 9th - Excessive bail? The 21st – The repeal of prohibition, by grabbing the last beer out the fridge at a party? Pursuit of happiness? But seriously, what they appeared to be most interested in this constitutionally sweeping question is bombing/over-the-line protesting at abortion clinics, which I concur is no laughing matter.

"*Have I ever engaged in wife-swapping?*" No.

When she asked this question I thought "*I'm sitting in a Cadillac at the end of my driveway talking to a DoD investigator about whether I'm a swinger. It simply cannot get any weirder than this.*"

But in defense of the of the investigator's questioning, Robert Hanssen, the FBI spy who sold secrets to the Russians, was into some over-the-top sexual escapades. It's probably a fair question given current events.

The only question that was mildly contentious was when she asked about foreign topics. Appropriate foreign contacts are an obvious area of concern for an intelligence agency, and the concern is warranted. Applicants must list all close-and-continuous foreign contacts and any foreign travel in the last 10 years in their security forms. However, instead of asking what I would consider a hard-to-misinterpret question in the polygraph examination that went something like "*have you ever supported an organization, financially or otherwise, that supports the armed overthrow of the United States Government?*", she asked:

"*Do you have any foreign interests?*"

I responded "*What exactly is a foreign interest? A financial interest, like owning an international mutual fund? Having a desire to travel?*" Which I thought was a reasonable clarifying question. The intent of my response was "*what specifically would you like to talk about?*" She responded with:

"*You're getting defensive...*"

That didn't go well. So I said "*yes*" to foreign interests and that I owned an international mutual fund and I had an occasional desire to travel. And she didn't ask a follow-up question. I think that was a blunt approach to a complex intelligence_interview

subject, because as I lived in a highly internationalized area of the country unless the applicant was a xenophobe there would inevitably be some “foreign interests.” What would have been more constructive, I thought, was to cite a few types up front, and of course add a “*and anything else significant*” or some other catch-all.

Below is a chart with foreign interests and a “continuum of relevance” of my own understanding. This is how I was trying to frame my answer:

| Sample Foreign Interest Types | Probably Benign | Gray Area | Probably Suspicious |
|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Contacts | Co-workers Local Judo instructor Neighbors | ... | Active members of foreign intelligence or military Friends who are frequent travelers to nations known to harbor terrorists |
| Equipment | Toyota Camrys | ... | Chinese Anti-Aircraft Missiles |
| Media | Telly-Tubbies (they <i>are</i> English) | The <i>Purple</i> Telly-Tubbie | Terrorist Training and Recruitment Films |
| Financial | International Mutual Funds ADRs (American Depository Receipts) | ... | Poppy fields In Thailand Cocaine processing plant in Columbia |
| Travel | Desire to see the <i>Canadian</i> side of Niagara Falls | ... | Taliban-era visits to Afghanistan |

I don’t mind any of this being up for discussion, but I’m either in the “benign” column or in the left side of the gray -scale. And I’m wayyy left of the “suspicious” column. And while Tinky-Winky does carry a snappy red handbag, that’s *his* fashion choice and I respect it – although his hat does make him look like a lavender Flavor-Flav of the rap-band *Public Enemy*. And the triangle on his head? Hey, not that there’s anything wrong with that...

Additionally, one the interview questions was “*how do I handle stress?*”

Then I remembered she was driving a Cadillac. And Safeway was around the corner. And I had a hammer in my garage. Anybody have a coconut? How do I handle stress, you asked? ‘Scuze me while I jump on the hood. *Wham! Wham! Wham!*

Just kidding. That last part didn’t actually happen. But it certainly was a unique experience.

Conclusion

Jump to the present.... after 3 ½ months of clearance processing I was rejected by security. Game over. Thanks for playing.

The most important lesson I learned was that for the purpose of life-planning the applicant should regard the CJO as a personal souvenir, nothing more. That harsh reality must be recognized, and it is not stated with any disrespect to the agency, and it also does not mean that the hiring manager wouldn’t want the applicant to start as soon as possible. But the hiring manager has no control over the clearance process. From the standpoint of checks-and-balances perhaps that’s for the best (or at least the original intent), but those are the facts.

There are scores of things that can go awry with the clearance process or at the very least slow it down to a crawl. One must be prepared to wait the process because the resulting answer might *not* be in the applicant’s favor.

With respect to my own process, I was caught in a catch-22 of my own making. I was in a period of transition from my old job – the startup I was working for was running out of money and 1/3 of the company was laid off, me

included. I turned down a private-sector full-time offer with a salary significantly higher than the NSA offer for a short-term contracting gig so that I could wait out my clearance. I was going to Save The World, or at least the American part of it. Based on the information I had at the time, it was a path that certainly wasn't risk-free, but it seemed an acceptable risk.

Unfortunately, as the process dragged on I got more and more nervous because I had passed up full-time work to...to *wait*. It didn't help that I was doing a lot of the contracting out of my house – by myself. And in retrospect, the pressure I placed on myself during the polygraph & psychological examinations was immense. I really wanted, and *needed*, them to go well. And I would hazard a guess that my nervousness wasn't interpreted in ways conducive to my getting cleared. It was – to invoke the overused phrase – The Perfect Storm.

Then there was an additional delay after the psych/poly examinations. I could see the end of my consulting contract approaching, and then I started getting feedback that there was a much greater possibility of bad news than I had previously believed. I was seriously stressed. “*I turned down solid work over 3 months ago for this?*” was a thought that went through my head with uncomfortable frequency. In fairness to the NSA, it's stated quite clearly in the CJO that there *is* attrition in the clearance process. My biggest strategic error was not in *acknowledging* risk-areas, but in the ability to *quantify* them with appropriate probabilities. But it's not like you can go to Vegas and get the odds. And the applicant can't just call the security group and ask “*so, what's on your mind?*”

Had I known in the beginning that rejections were up *significantly* from pre-9/11 clearances, or that the last 3-4-5 consecutive candidates to get CJOs had been rejected, there is no way in heck I would have taken the same path and waited. But that wasn't information I had at the time. The division I interviewed with had not actually hired anybody in 5 years (no budget), so the while the insights I received about the process were accurate, they were accurate for 5 years back. And the division had no other current candidate experiences to share when I started the process. It isn't *their* fault either, because that was the only information *they* had at the time, and the operational folks don't talk to security folks, etc.

In absolute terms of *All Things Stressful* (not a National Public Radio program, but perhaps it should be), this experience is certainly less stressful than being shot at in anger in a war-zone, or having a rocket-propelled grenade targeted at your vehicle. And also less stressful than being an emergency room doctor or nurse, or losing a spouse or child to cancer. But given the circumstances surrounding my specific experience, I'd have to estimate it might be in the next tier or two not because of any single stressful incident but due to the aggregate stress over the period. Being in-limbo takes its toll, and “roller coaster” only begins to describe it.

For me, the NSA was the right idea but at the wrong time, and a lot like finding a coupon on the ground for “50% off on any house in America” only to realize that the coupon expired the day before.

I took a leap of faith... and landed on my face. But I had to try it.

My wife should get a Nobel Prize in the category of Eternal Patience and Understanding for letting me try this, living through it, and still wanting to stay married. Thanks.

Special thanks for the division manager for making this adventure possible on the other side of the fence. You tried, and I appreciate it. Thanks also for two people in NSA recruiting for not only tolerating my requests for information & status, but providing speedy responses. You know who you are.

However....

After the process was over, I was talking to one of my references - a veteran Silicon Valley software executive, and former manager of mine. My reference commented on what transpired “*That's disappointing. If they can't hire you, I have no idea who they can hire. That process seems to be designed to retain only the most bland.*”

The ‘bland’ comment might be a bit severe, however, considering the 1999 External Management report it would appear that the agency would appear to need creative thinkers & problem-solvers more than ever.

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Appendix

A Little More On The Five Factor Model

I would guess (or rather, hope) that there is no single “right” profile to work at the NSA. But there are probably a few profiles that might raise a red-flag (one can only guess if the “paranoid “ profile is *really* a liability at the NSA.) While I did not recall them initially, I recognize most of the questions on the right as being from the computerized test. The associations of questions to ailments are cited from a psychological text. Do not consider this an exhaustive list of potential profiles, as I just picked a few interesting ones.

| Profile | Simplified Factor Attributes | You <i>might</i> be if all of these apply... (applicant’s test answer in parentheses) |
|---|---|---|
| PARANOID Pervasive pattern of distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent | Low A – especially Trust, Straightforwardness, Compliance High N – especially Angry Hostility. | (true) There are persons who are trying to steal my thoughts and ideas (true) I have often thought that strangers were looking at me critically (true) I feel that I have often been punished without cause |
| BORDERLINE Pervasive pattern of instability and interpersonal relationships, self-image, and marked impulsivity | Excessive N (all facets), plus Low A – specifically low Compliance, Trust. | (false) I am not easily angered (true) I get mad easily and then get over it soon (true) I sometimes feel that I am about to go to pieces |
| SCHIZOTYPAL Pervasive pattern of detachment, plus cognitive or perceptual distortions | High N – especially Anxiety and Self-Consciousness | (true) I have strange and peculiar thoughts (true) I have had very strange and peculiar experiences (true) I often feel as if things were not real |
| SCHIZOID Pervasive pattern of detachment | Low E – especially Warmth. | (false) I like parties and socials (false) I enjoy social gatherings just to be with people (false) I am a good mixer |
| NARCISSISTIC Pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, lack of empathy | Low A – especially Modesty, tough mindedness Often high in Achievement striving (C). | (false) When in a group of people I have trouble thinking of the right things to talk about (true) If given the chance, I would make a good leader of people (true) I have no dread of going into a room by myself where other people have already gathered and started talking |
| COMPULSIVE Preoccupation with orderliness and perfectionism at the expense of flexibility | Primarily Excessive C (all facets) | (true) I frequently find myself worrying about something (true) I must admit that I have at times been worried beyond reason over something that did not matter (true) I have met problems so full of possibilities that I have been unable to make up my mind about them |
| HISTRIONIC Excessive emotionality and attention seeking | Extreme E. Often combined with Extreme O – especially Fantasy facet. | (false) I find it hard to make small talk when I meet new people (true) While in trains, buses, etc., I often talk to strangers (true) I like to go to parties and other affairs where there is |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | lots of loud fun |
| ANTISOCIAL Pervasive pattern of disregard for the rights of others | Low A – especially Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Tender-Mindedness Low C – specifically Deliberation. | (true) In school, I was sometimes sent to the principal for cutting up (true) As a youngster, I was suspended one or more times for cutting up (true) If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I would not be seen, I would probably do it. |
| POULTROCLUCKO-PHOBIA Pervasive pattern of fearing that one will cluck like a chicken | Outrageous C – especially Crunchiness. | (true) I sometimes feel that I am about to go to pieces – specifically, pieces shaped like Chicken Tenders dipped in honey mustard sauce (false) I have no dread of going into a room by myself where other people have already gathered and started clucking (true) As a youngster, I was suspended one or more times for cutting up... chickens |

If the reader has any questions on the above material, consult a textbook, website, or professional. Don't take my word for it... look for yourself!

After a process like this, I think anybody would be justified on answering 'true' to...

I have had very strange and peculiar experiences

... but the \$64,000 question is whether you would be Schizotypal if you thought this was a "peculiar" experience, or some other form of crazy if you didn't? (But it's just *one* question, isn't it?)

Excerpt From Academy Executive Summary Report On Polygraph

The following is what I consider a salient excerpt from the National Academy of Sciences report on the Polygraph.

Basic Science

Almost a century of research in scientific psychology and physiology provides little basis for the expectation that a polygraph test could have extremely high accuracy. Although psychological states often associated with deception (e.g., fear of being judged deceptive) do tend to affect the physiological responses that the polygraph measures, these same states can arise in the absence of deception. Moreover, many other psychological and physiological factors (e.g., anxiety about being tested) also affect those responses. Such phenomena make polygraph testing intrinsically susceptible to producing erroneous results. This inherent ambiguity of the physiological measures used in the polygraph suggests that further investments in improving polygraph technique and interpretation will bring only modest improvements in accuracy.

Polygraph research has not developed and tested theories of the underlying factors that produce the observed responses. Factors other than truthfulness that affect the physiological responses being measured can vary substantially across settings in which polygraph tests are used. There is little knowledge about how much these factors influence the outcomes of polygraph tests in field settings. For example, there is evidence suggesting that truthful members of socially stigmatized groups and truthful examinees who are believed to be guilty or believed to have a high likelihood of being guilty may show emotional and physiological responses in polygraph test situations that mimic the responses that are expected of deceptive individuals. The lack of understanding of the processes that underlie polygraph responses makes it very difficult to generalize from the results obtained in specific research settings or with particular subject populations to other settings or populations, or from laboratory research studies to real-world applications.

Evidence on Polygraph Accuracy

Scientific evidence relevant to the accuracy of polygraph tests for employee or preemployment screening is extremely limited. Only one field study, which is flawed, provides evidence directly relevant to accuracy for preemployment screening. A few additional laboratory studies are relevant to preemployment or employee screening, but they are more analogous to specific-incident investigations than to screening because the deceptive examinee is given a precise recent incident about which to lie.

Estimates of accuracy from these 57 studies are almost certainly higher than actual polygraph accuracy of specific-incident testing in the field. Laboratory studies tend to overestimate accuracy because laboratory conditions involve much less variation in test implementation, in the characteristics of examinees, and in the nature and context of investigations than arises in typical field applications. Observational studies of polygraph testing in the field are plagued by selection and measurement biases, such as the inclusion of tests carried out by examiners with knowledge of the evidence and of cases whose outcomes are affected by the examination. In addition, they frequently lack a clear and independent determination of truth. Due to these inherent biases, observational field studies are also highly likely to overestimate real-world polygraph accuracy.

CONCLUSION: Notwithstanding the limitations of the quality of the empirical research and the limited ability to generalize to real-world settings, we conclude that in populations of examinees such as those represented in the polygraph research literature, untrained in countermeasures, specific-incident polygraph tests can discriminate lying from truth telling at rates well above chance, though well below perfection. Because the studies of acceptable quality all focus on specific incidents, generalization from them to uses for screening is not justified. Because actual screening applications involve considerably more ambiguity for the examinee and in determining truth than arises in specific-incident studies, polygraph accuracy for screening purposes is almost certainly lower than what can be achieved by specific-incident polygraph tests in the field.

The accuracy levels in the four screening simulations in our sample, which include a validation study of the Test for Espionage and Sabotage (TES) used in the employee security screening program of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), are in the range reported for other specific-incident laboratory studies. The one field study of actual screening presents results consistent with the expectation that polygraph accuracy in true screening situations is lower.

Sample Clearance Process Definition

Below is a sample process definition for clearance of my own documentation. Processes may vary by agency, so consider this a straw-man, but all intelligence careers involve some sort of clearance process. A significant point to consider is that wherever there is a step that says “wait” the applicant should remember that the minimum unit of measure is “weeks,” and not “days” (unless one is willing to multiply by 7). For some agencies it might be “months.” For example, it might take 3-4 weeks to schedule a polygraph, and then 3-4 weeks to process the results. Going in with this expectation helps to reduce surprises.

Notice the potential loop from steps 7 to step 11. Based on the findings in the National Academy of Science’s report on the polygraph, a polygraph examination is largely a non-deterministic (i.e., random) exercise. Some people get a “clean” result on one try, others need 2, 3, 4, etc., even though the applicant says the exact same thing each time, and it can happen to anybody. It’s best to know this in advance and plan accordingly. (I’d like to point out that I think honesty is the best policy, but honesty is not always polygraph compatible)

1. Submit Security Forms
2. Wait for forms-complete
3. If forms-complete, then proceed to 4, else goto 1
4. Schedule Psych
5. Wait for Psych
6. Do Psych
7. Schedule Polygraph
8. Wait for Polygraph
9. Do Poly
10. Wait for poly results
11. If not-clean, return to 7
12. Conduct Background Investigation
13. Wait on BI
14. Have Security Interview
15. Wait on BI
16. When BI is concluded, wait on Adjudication
17. Adjudication

Freedom of Information Act

One of the important aspects of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is that applicants are entitled to request obtain copies of their own background investigations. It might take a while, but they are legally obligated to provide it.

<http://www.usdoj.gov/04foia/>

This site contains FOIA contacts for all Federal agencies, such as the NSA, CIA, FBI, DIA, NRO, etc.

Afterword

When this document was initially published I was expecting it to be read by about 10 people. Maybe 20. I was just glad I finished it, as it was very much a cathartic experience. My primary concern was really whether it was a quality paper. After all, who wants to read about a guy that got rejected?

Quite a few people, it turns out.

I'd like to thank FAS for taking an interest in this story. And I'd also like to thank the many reader comments that flowed in. I was pleased that the feedback to date was that the paper was viewed to be highly respectful of the agency while still providing constructive commentary. *Whew!* That was very much the intent. Particularly gratifying was feedback from other NSA applicants who had been rejected who wrote very much identifying with the stresses and the accuracy of the experience.

Several wrote describing frustration with the polygraph process, including one that was so frustrated that she dropped out of the process after several "not clean enough" polygraph examinations. This might be just another clearance statistic to the agency, but I found this profoundly sad and a waste of resources and talent. It was another case of "*I was really excited about career opportunities at the agency, but then...*" and who have moved on to different jobs. Feedback also came in from applicants from *other* government agencies (e.g., "*hey, that reminded me of the time I interviewed with <fill in blank>. I wish I had read this before interviewing with them.*") Others feedback expressed frustration of clearance process in other agencies, including one person who's clearance investigation expired (2 year limit), and then he had to start the entire process over again. The word "intrusive" came up several times - as did the word "flawed" - from people familiar with the clearance process in general (i.e., not necessarily specific to the agency.) A question that came up from a few former applicants was "*do you know if I'll ever be eligible for a security clearance after getting rejected by the agency?*" Good question, and I wondered the same thing. Personally, I would estimate "no" for anything higher than guarding a trashcan by the Washington Monument. It's the scarlet letter R. In this event, you either get the Gold Medal or you go hurtling off the ramp like that 1970's *Agony of Defeat* ski-jumper on the *Wide World of Sports*, but without the notoriety or residual checks (I hope that ABC Sports paid that guy something because that crash *had* to hurt.) But seriously, if anybody finds out anything to the contrary, let me know.

The majority of readers were mostly in the category of "*entertaining!*" and "*MAN, that was WEIRD!*" And I was surprised who came across the paper. I got several emails along the lines of "*a friend of mine emailed me this link,*" but here's my favorite story to date: a printed copy was left in a Bay Area airport where it was found by a bartender/waitress working at said facility. She picked it up and read it, and emailed me saying she enjoyed it, and even passed it to a friend of hers who worked at a Naval installation who also read it and said same. Thanks!

Additionally, some terrific feedback (and links) came from readers on the Freedom of Information Act, Security Adjudication Guidelines, and Security Adjudication Appeals. I've updated the appendix to include information on all these subjects. It became clear to be that I wasn't the only one who felt like being in high-seas in a rowboat while simultaneously under a giant microscope during the clearance process, so I've updated the document with this information. The combination of those analogies seems nonsensical (e.g., if you're in a rowboat where does the giant microscope come from?), but believe me, it feels like that.

To answer another question: before this was published online, I emailed this paper (under my real name) to the recruiting division at the agency and called the division chief (again, real name) to make sure it was received. It was. I let them sit on it for about 3 weeks. No response. Concurrently, I also asked recruiting for a copy of any applicable NDA they thought I was under. They referred me to a person in legal. So I emailed *that* person with the same request. No response. Other than renting a plane and towing a football-field-length banner over central Maryland I'm not sure how much more straightforward I could have been, or given them more of a chance to respond to the document. Not giving them an opportunity to review, however, wouldn't have been suitable.

To the readers who suggested I keep writing: thanks! I just need to have *another* really crazy experience...