

## Classification of vulnerability factors in the process of psychological manipulation

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological manipulations both conscious and unconscious are ubiquitous. This article introduces three-step empirical research of psychological manipulation targets through vulnerability factors a manipulator exploits in interpersonal communication process in Russian context. In the Study 1 we conducted a survey (N=647) on subjective valuation in persuasion and social influence by manipulation receivers. As a result, we obtained a primary classification of vulnerabilities among the emotions and values of the objects of manipulation. In the Study 2 factor analysis showed four-type model of manipulators. Study 3 survey (N=5959) revealed the connection between perceived social influence and vulnerability factors. As a result, we managed to design a classification of vulnerability factors, create a four-type model of manipulators.

**Keywords:** manipulation of consciousness, vulnerability, persuasion, social influence,

Themes: social psychology

### Introduction

The manipulation subject of human consciousness has been relevant since Ancient times and entered psychological science in the end of the XIX century. A great contribution to the study of the problem at that time was made by F. Pinel, B. Morel, J.M. Charcot, C. Lombroso, S. Freud, C. Jung, and others. An important step in studying the phenomenon of psychological influence on large social groups was the work of G. Tard, G. Lebon, Ortega-i-Gasset, and others, who examined various social phenomena through the positive influence of stable elements in the minds of the masses and the negative mass-like processes of emotional and psychological infection, panic and fear, produced by the psychology of the crowd (Langone, 2001). Historical overview of relative research papers gave us an opportunity to outline several approaches. Firstly, associative approach is represented by Brown, Wundt, Bernard, who believed that in suggestion, as in association, one stimulus causes a chain of reactions.

Secondly, in the framework of the behavioral approach, represented by Hull and Allport, it is believed that the impact directly, automatically causes a response (Garfield et al., 1977). According to Klein, the effect of psychological influence is entirely determined by the content and method of its presentation, at the same time, the person is a passive "receiver" of influence (Klein, 1988). Drucker concludes that, using the

techniques of psychological influence, people can be manipulated so that they do what manipulators want from them (Drucker, 2002).

Thirdly, significant impact on the development of modern concepts was made by theories developed within the framework of cognitive psychology, namely: the theory of cognitive conformity (Norman, 1975), the theory of social comparison (Festinger et al, 1950), the attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), the theory of attraction (Byrne, 1997), the theory of self-perception (Bem, 1972), the theory of impression management (Todeshi, 2013).

Fourthly, in humanistic psychology, the concept of psychological influence is being ignored on purpose. Humanistic psychologists assume that human activity and the need for self-improvement are interconnected and developed only in terms of relationships or communication between people, which is built on the principles of equal dialogue.

Hence, on the one hand, there is a great lack of up to date and empirical research on social influence and psychological manipulation. On the other hand, there are different approaches to this phenomenon within psychology and social studies. The terminology of the subject underwent a great transformation from the studies of psychological influence on large social groups in the beginning to the studies of Brain Network Dynamics Supporting Social Influence and Persuasion (Falk, Scholz, 2018).

## Psychological manipulation

In their research Braiker and Harriet introduced the definition of Psychological manipulation as a type of social influence that aims to change the behavior or perception of others through abusive, deceptive, or underhanded tactics (Braiker, Harriet, 2004). In general, it covers the essence of this phenomenon, but does not reflect several features which are essential to the understanding of destructive nature of manipulation.

According to our concept, there are four main properties of psychological manipulation:

1. psychological influence;
2. violent nature;
3. hidden agenda;
4. Behavior pattern that the manipulator expects from the object.

Taking these four components of psychological manipulation (PM) we designed the following definition: ***Manipulation is a type of hidden psychological influence on a person (of abusive and deceptive nature) against his or her will. Manipulation always have a myth, specific goal and pre-designed scenario of a victim's behavior.***

In comparison with social influence PM has a vivid destructive nature, while social influence is generally perceived to be harmless when it respects the right of the receiver to accept or reject it and is not unduly coercive.

Psychological manipulation affects emotions, as rationality and critical thinking fade into background. At the same time, it's always aimed at a specific vulnerability of a person in the process of interpersonal communication. We call these emotional triggers and values that are affected by the manipulator, the **manipulation target**.

In order to structure these manipulation targets we used the theory of 16 basic desires introduced by Reiss, which holds that 16 genetically distinct desires (intrinsic motives) combine to determine many psychologically significant motives (Reiss, 2004). The model supports predictions about behavior and provides standardized measures (such as the Reiss Profile self-report version) needed to test the validity of the predictions.

In terms of psychological manipulation, those basic desires that are unusually strong or unusually weak compared with appropriate norms may explain a person's vulnerability to one or another psychological manipulation technique.

## Research hypothesis

Taking this into consideration we suggested that there is a possibility to classify basic types of psychological manipulators, considering psychological vulnerabilities of manipulation targets.

## Study 1

In this study we were working on the structuring of vulnerabilities exploited by manipulators. Aim of this study was to reveal the most subjectively sensitive and vulnerable emotional triggers and values that manipulator exploits in the context of interpersonal communication.

## Method

From April 2013 to June 2017 we conducted semantic network analysis of (N=647) cases and personal stories, both in written and oral form provided by respondents from various cities in Russia. The age of participants is from 19 to 63, of which 61% are women, 39% are men. 92% are employed, 8% are unemployed and students.

At first, all participants in the study received an explanation of what manipulation is. It was important for us to emphasize all four components of this concept in order to ensure that the participants accurately understood what was meant and were able to share relevant experience. After that they were asked to recall the most difficult case of manipulation they encountered in work, business, in a family, friendship or in some other area. Semantic network analysis revealed what were the main emotional triggers and values being exploited by the manipulators.

## Result

Semantic network analysis showed 7 different emotional triggers and values that were subjectively considered as the most vulnerable under the influence of the manipulator in the context of interpersonal communication.

1. *Guilt*. That is a natural reaction to actions of morally ambiguous character, which a person had taken. These may include violation of generally accepted norms and morality, social standards and patterns of behavior, as well as not justifying the hopes of significant ones. Hence the manipulator uses this stimulus as a motivating force for action (Bartra et al. 2013, Levy & Glimcher 2012).

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Speaking of the vulnerability that is exploits by the manipulator, it concerns such dimension as “Acceptance”. That is desire for social acceptance, belonging, positive self-worth. According to

Reiss, people with a strong need for acceptance maybe more sensitive to failure and criticism. They are tuned in and sensitive to what people think (Reiss, 1998).

2. *Pity*. In search of support, approval and real help, the manipulator finds a victim with a high level of empathy. This manipulation target was described in detail in the Drama Triangle model introduced by Steve Karpman (Karpman, 1973). Also, it correlates with “Idealism” - the desire for social justice and fairness. People with a strong need for idealism may be strongly motivated by social justice, may be tuned in to the welfare of the needy. At the same time, people with a weak need for idealism may believe that injustice and unfairness are part of the life.

3. *Fear*. It is the dominant instinct that underlies our conscious and unconscious reactions. Bullying and threats are favorite manipulator tools. People seek for emotional comfort and relaxation. People with a strong desire for “Tranquility” may have a high sensitivity for danger, risk, or pain. They might experience a fair amount of anxiety or stress.

4. *Gender and sexuality*. In a couple, one of the partners or both use sex as a reward, and rejection of it or coldness as a punishment. Also, in different relationships, including in a business context, gender stereotypes can be used manipulatively: “Well, you're a man!”, “A man should earn money!”, “A woman should be a good housewife!”. Furthermore, the issue of social influence and persuasion through the gender identity has been studied both in Russian and foreign literature as a part of abnormal psychology (MacLeod, Rutherford, Campbell, Ebsworthy, Holker, 2002). According to Reiss, “Romance” touches upon such feeling as lust. People with a strong need for romance may be more romantic and attracted by eroticism than is the average person.

5. *Self-esteem*. Human motivation is based on people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth. It refers to the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially (Goldstein, 1993; Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1954). Furthermore, self-esteem is considered to be one of the most vulnerable part of self in societies with high masculinity (Hofstede, 2012).

In this case manipulators exploits person's desire for prestige, reputation and public attention, since people with a strong need for status care about their “face” and avoid making bad impression.

6. *A sense of justice*. The manipulator calls for standing up for justice, but upon closer examination it turns out that in this way he solves only personal problems rather than correcting an injustice in society. The use of this manipulation target is based on the theory of cognitive dissonance. The object of PM experiences internal inconsistency and becomes psychologically uncomfortable, and so is motivated to reduce the cognitive dissonance, by making changes to justify the stressful behavior, by actively avoiding social situations which includes behaving according to the manipulators’ scenario.

7. *“Face” factor*. The manipulator exploits the fact that we are embarrassed of refusing a request because of being, afraid of offending someone, being rude, losing love or affection of others.

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People willingness to preserve relationships to Such communication scenario also works in collectivistic societies, where social relationships and harmony determine person behavior in the

process of communication (De Freitas, Sarkissian, Newman, Grossmann, De Brigard, Luco, Knobe, 2018).

## **Study 2**

In this study we worked on the classification of manipulators based on the targets they exploit in the process of PM. Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 2001) and theories of embodied social cognition (Semin & Cacioppo, 2008), recent evidence also suggests that synchronization between communicators and receivers is a key component of successful persuasion and social influence, beyond the brain activity observed in either party alone (Scholz et al. 2017b, Stephens et al. 2010).

## **Method**

Qualitative interviews data, used in Study 1, were used for the further examination. We conducted item analysis in order to define axis dimensions of manipulators personal traits. Analysis showed that the classification of types of manipulators through the vulnerability targets is possible based on two scales with polar values: aggressiveness - friendliness and activity - passivity.

## **Results**

We introduced four types of manipulators (see Figure 1):

### **1. Despot**

Representative of this PM type dominates, tries to control everything, a real dictator in interpersonal relations. It is characterized by a high level of aggression and activity. He demonstrates strength, control, uses a strategy of humiliation and repression of the victim.

### **2. Victim**

The manipulator, which constantly demonstrates that he is a victim of circumstances, exploits the pity of others towards him and often assumes the role of an addict, helpless person, requiring attention, care and help. He is not aggressive but does not show friendliness. In addition, he behaves passively, demonstrating weakness, infantilism, vulnerability.

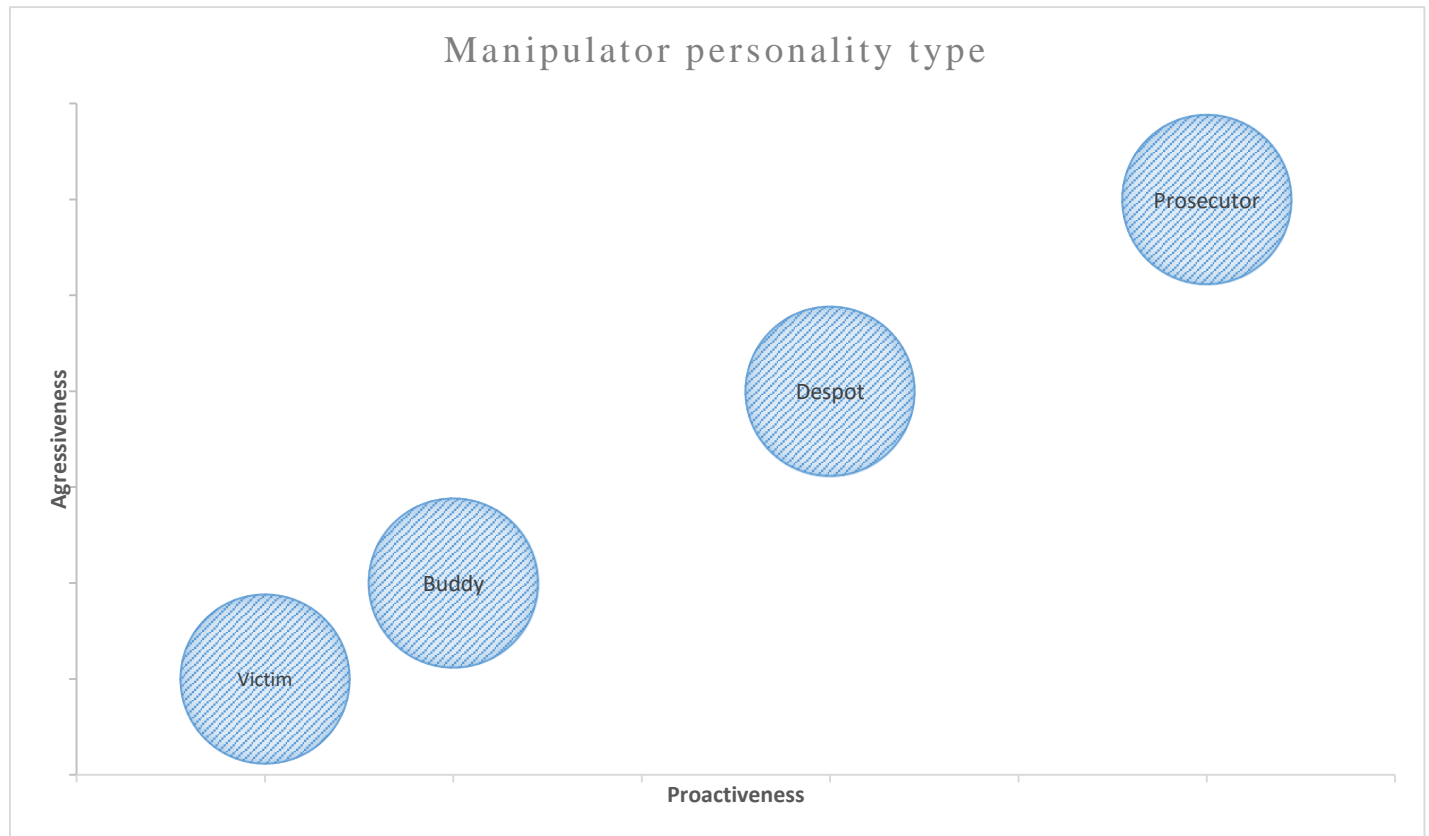
### **3. Prosecutor**

A representative of this type of manipulator builds his strategy on criticism and guilt of its victim. He condemns, humiliates, compares, makes claims, treats others with skepticism. Inclined to attribute his failure to the circumstances. His behavior is active and aggressive.

### **4. Buddy**

A representative of this type is skillfully communicator who masterfully gains the trust of the manipulation object. By establishing a relationship, he commits the victim to fulfill his

requirements. Using the psychological effect of the foot-in-the-doorway, he requires the object to make larger contributions (Freedman, Fraser, 1966).



### Study 3

This stage of the study aims to verify the results obtained in the two previous studies. We conducted a quantitative study that showed which types of manipulators our respondents encountered.

### Method

We used psychometric diagnostics to determine which PM scenarios were used to influence our respondents (N=5959). This test was published on the web-site <http://manipulation-book.ru>, so



that the readers of the book “I am manipulating you. Methods to counter the hidden influence” by Nepryakhin N.<sup>1</sup> had an open access.

Statistical analysis showed what vulnerabilities are used by manipulators in Russian context (see Figure 2).

## Result

According to the quantitative research the most popular vulnerability of a person in the context of interpersonal communication is Buddy-type (32%).

Its statistically predictable, hence he exploits four different emotional triggers, such as gender identity, self-esteem, sense of justice and concept of “face”.

Even though this type of manipulator has the most diverse spectrum of targets, its popularity can also be explained by the cultural and social characteristics of Russian society.

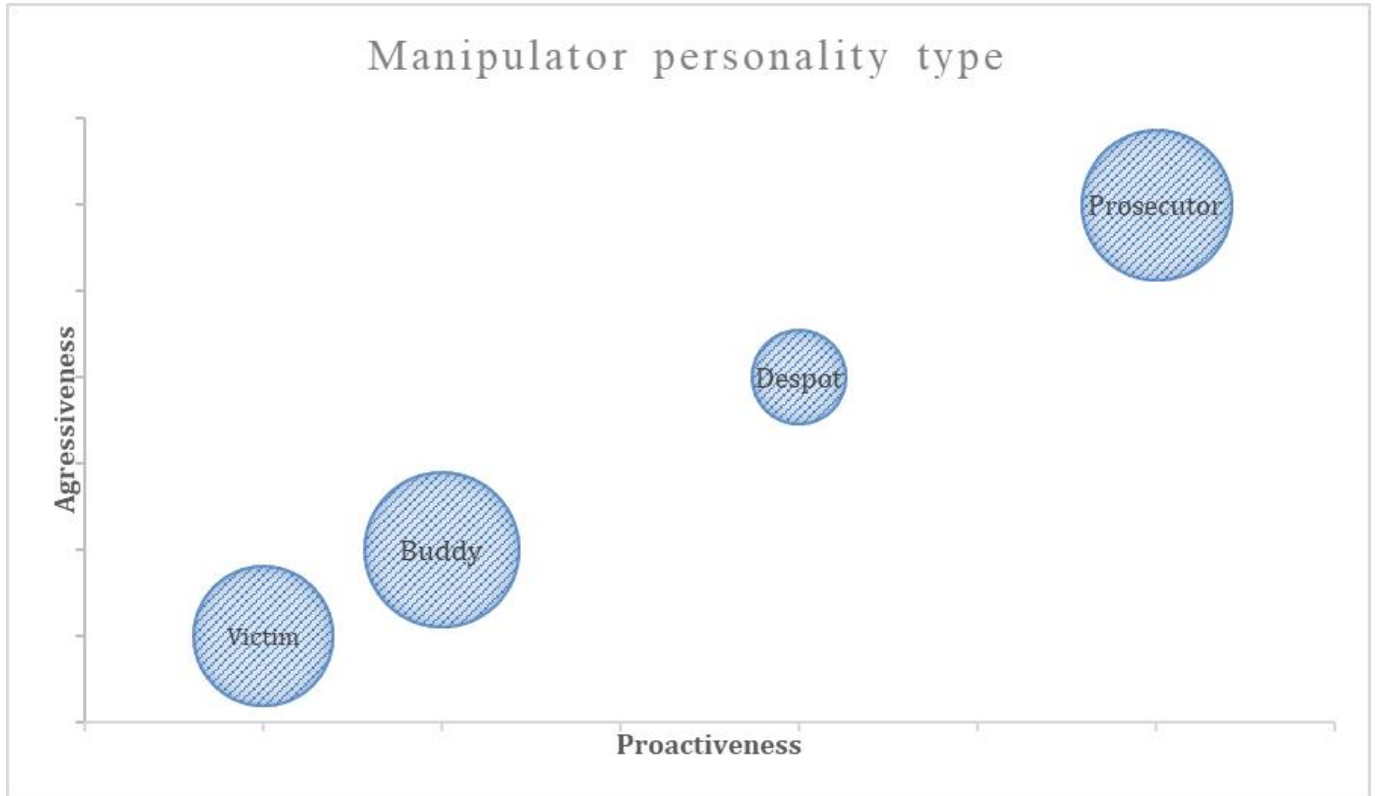
The next was Prosecutor (30%), who is using guilt as a vulnerable emotional target. One of the mechanisms of such PM target is that in the collectivistic culture, such as Russia, where people try to avoid conflicts, manipulator deliberately provokes a conflict so that the object makes concessions in order to preserve harmony in communication.

There are two main communication patterns due to which Victim (26%) manage to exploit victims’ vulnerabilities. On the one hand this strategy is used to manipulate a person with higher authority and more aggressive and direct style of communication. On the other hand in collectivistic and relationship-oriented appealing to the pity is productive.

Despot (12%) is less frequent in Russian context due to specific cultural aspects. Russian culture is highly hierarchical. Which means that despotic type of influence is often exercised by people in power (bosses, superiors or leaders). And by being in power gives them the authority to behave in a despotic manner. Moreover, this place in power gives them the opportunity to do it openly. And we know that manipulative influence is hidden in nature. That is if a representative of Russian culture wants to use a manipulation, he is unlikely to use despotic influence and would rather use other type of manipulation.

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<sup>1</sup>Nepryakhin (2018) I am manipulating you. Methods to counter the hidden influence, Alpina Publisher, 376, ISBN 9785961465419



### Conclusion

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The topic of psychological manipulation is fairly researched in science. However, common people are lacking the necessary knowledge to fight off manipulators in daily life. The situation is even worse due to fact that most of the people encounter manipulations in work and personal life on a daily basis. And unfortunately, in most cases most of us are defenseless against this type of influence.

Our study was aimed not only to enrich theoretical knowledge on psychological manipulation, but also to develop an applicable and useful tool for practical purposes such as defence against destructive effect of manipulation.

Through a quantitative research we managed to identify the most vulnerable targets exploited by manipulators, among them are guilt, pity, fear, gender and sexuality, self-esteem, sense of justice, "face" factor. Then we managed to classify the manipulators themselves basing on the vulnerabilities they use. Analysis showed two axis dimensions - aggressiveness vs. friendliness and activity vs. passivity. The result of employing this matrix was four-type classification on manipulators: despot, victim, prosecutor, buddy. Then we managed to verify the results of the two previous stages. It is hard to overestimate the significance of the results we managed to get from the process.

Such an approach allowed us to create an easy-to-understand framework which everybody can use in their daily life. Three-stage research provided people with not only an understanding of what a manipulation is, but how to counter it. Knowing how manipulation works, understanding one's own vulnerability targets and classification of manipulators allows people without any scientific or research background to successfully fend off manipulators.

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