

# Psychological manipulation

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**Psychological manipulation** is a type of social influence that aims to change the perception or behavior of others through underhanded, deceptive, or even abusive tactics. By advancing the interests of the manipulator, often at another's expense, such methods could be considered exploitative, abusive, devious, and deceptive. Social influence is not necessarily negative. For example, doctors can try to persuade patients to change unhealthy habits. Social influence is generally perceived to be harmless when it respects the right of the influenced to accept or reject and is not unduly coercive. Depending on the context and motivations, social influence may constitute underhanded manipulation.

## Requirements for successful manipulation

According to psychology author George K. Simon, successful psychological manipulation primarily involves the manipulator:

1. concealing aggressive intentions and behaviors.
2. knowing the psychological vulnerabilities of the victim to determine what tactics are likely to be the most effective.
3. having a sufficient level of ruthlessness to have no qualms about causing harm to the victim if necessary.

Consequently, the manipulation is likely to be accomplished through covert aggressive (relational aggressive or passive aggressive) means.<sup>[1]</sup>

## How manipulators control their victims

### According to Braiker

Clinical psychologist Harriet Braiker wrote a self help book which identified the following basic ways that manipulators control their victims:

- **Positive reinforcement:** includes praise, superficial charm, superficial sympathy (crocodile tears), excessive apologizing, money, approval, gifts, attention, facial expressions such as a forced laugh or smile, and public recognition.
  - **Negative reinforcement:** involves removing one from a negative situation as a reward, e.g. "You won't have to do your homework if you allow me to do this to you."
  - **Intermittent or partial reinforcement:** Partial or intermittent negative reinforcement can create an effective climate of fear and doubt. Partial or intermittent positive reinforcement can encourage the victim to persist - for example in most forms of gambling, the gambler is likely to win now and again but still lose money overall.
  - **Punishment:** includes nagging, yelling, the silent treatment, intimidation, threats, swearing, emotional blackmail, the guilt trip, sulking, crying, and playing the victim.
  - **Traumatic one-trial learning:** using verbal abuse, explosive anger, or other intimidating behavior to establish dominance or superiority; even one incident of such behavior can condition or train victims to avoid upsetting, confronting or contradicting the manipulator.
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## According to Simon

Simon identified the following manipulative techniques:

- **Lying:** It is hard to tell if somebody is lying at the time they do it, although often the truth may be apparent later when it is too late. One way to minimize the chances of being lied to is to understand that some personality types (particularly psychopaths) are experts at the art of lying and cheating, doing it frequently, and often in subtle ways.
  - **Lying by omission:** This is a very subtle form of lying by withholding a significant amount of the truth. This technique is also used in propaganda.
  - **Denial:** Manipulator refuses to admit that he or she has done something wrong.
  - **Rationalization:** An excuse made by the manipulator for inappropriate behavior. Rationalization is closely related to spin.
  - **Minimization:** This is a type of denial coupled with rationalization. The manipulator asserts that his or her behavior is not as harmful or irresponsible as someone else was suggesting, for example saying that a taunt or insult was only a joke.
  - **Selective inattention or selective attention:** Manipulator refuses to pay attention to anything that may distract from his or her agenda, saying things like "I don't want to hear it".
  - **Diversion:** Manipulator not giving a straight answer to a straight question and instead being diversionary, steering the conversation onto another topic.
  - **Evasion:** Similar to diversion but giving irrelevant, rambling, vague responses, weasel words.
  - **Covert intimidation:** Manipulator throwing the victim onto the defensive by using veiled (subtle, indirect or implied) threats.
  - **Guilt trip:** A special kind of intimidation tactic. A manipulator suggests to the conscientious victim that he or she does not care enough, is too selfish or has it easy. This usually results in the victim feeling bad, keeping them in a self-doubting, anxious and submissive position.
  - **Shaming:** Manipulator uses sarcasm and put-downs to increase fear and self-doubt in the victim. Manipulators use this tactic to make others feel unworthy and therefore defer to them. Shaming tactics can be very subtle such as a fierce look or glance, unpleasant tone of voice, rhetorical comments, subtle sarcasm. Manipulators can make one feel ashamed for even daring to challenge them. It is an effective way to foster a sense of inadequacy in the victim.
  - **Playing the victim role:** Manipulator portrays him- or herself as a victim of circumstance or of someone else's behavior in order to gain pity, sympathy or evoke compassion and thereby get something from another. Caring and conscientious people cannot stand to see anyone suffering and the manipulator often finds it easy to play on sympathy to get cooperation.
  - **Vilifying the victim:** More than any other, this tactic is a powerful means of putting the victim on the defensive while simultaneously masking the aggressive intent of the manipulator.
  - **Playing the servant role:** Cloaking a self-serving agenda in guise of a service to a more noble cause, for example saying he is acting in a certain way to be "obedient" to or in "service" to an authority figure or "just doing their job".
  - **Seduction:** Manipulator uses charm, praise, flattery or overtly supporting others in order to get them to lower their defenses and give their trust and loyalty to him or her.
  - **Projecting the blame (blaming others):** Manipulator scapegoats in often subtle, hard-to-detect ways.
  - **Feigning innocence:** Manipulator tries to suggest that any harm done was unintentional or that they did not do something that they were accused of. Manipulator may put on a look of surprise or indignation. This tactic makes the victim question his or her own judgment and possibly his own sanity.
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- Feigning confusion: Manipulator tries to play dumb by pretending he or she does not know what the victim is talking about or is confused about an important issue brought to his or her attention.
- Brandishing anger: Manipulator uses anger to brandish sufficient emotional intensity and rage to shock the victim into submission. The manipulator is not actually angry, he or she just puts on an act. He just wants what he wants and gets "angry" when denied.

## Vulnerabilities exploited by manipulators

According to Braiker's self-help book, manipulators exploit the following vulnerabilities (buttons) that may exist in victims:

- the "disease to please"
- addiction to earning the approval and acceptance of others
- Emotophobia (fear of negative emotion; *i.e.* a fear of expressing anger, frustration or disapproval)
- lack of assertiveness and ability to say no
- blurry sense of identity (with soft personal boundaries)
- low self-reliance
- external locus of control

According to Simon, manipulators exploit the following vulnerabilities that may exist in victims:

- naïveté - victim finds it too hard to accept the idea that some people are cunning, devious and ruthless or is "in denial" if he or she is being victimized.
- over-conscientiousness - victim is too willing to give manipulator the benefit of the doubt and see their side of things in which they blame the victim.
- low self-confidence - victim is self-doubting, lacking in confidence and assertiveness, likely to go on the defensive too easily.
- over-intellectualization - victim tries too hard to understand and believes the manipulator has some understandable reason to be hurtful.
- emotional dependency - victim has a submissive or dependent personality. The more emotionally dependent the victim is, the more vulnerable he or she is to being exploited and manipulated.

Manipulators generally take the time to scope out the characteristics and vulnerabilities of their victim.

Kantor advises in his book, the following are vulnerable to psychopathic manipulators:

- too dependent - dependent people need to be loved and are therefore gullible and liable to say yes to something to which they should say no.
  - too immature - has impaired judgment and believes the exaggerated advertising claims.
  - too naïve - cannot believe there are dishonest people in the world, taking for granted that if there were they would not be allowed to operate.
  - too impressionable - overly seduced by charmers. For example, they might vote for the seemingly charming politician who kisses babies.
  - too trusting - people who are honest often assume that everyone else is honest. They are more likely to commit themselves to people they hardly know without checking credentials, etc., and less likely to question so-called experts.
  - too lonely - lonely people may accept any offer of human contact. A psychopathic stranger may offer human companionship for a price.
  - too narcissistic - narcissists are prone to falling for unmerited flattery.
  - too impulsive - make snap decisions about, for example, what to buy or whom to marry without consulting others.
  - too altruistic - the opposite of psychopathic: too honest, too fair, too empathetic.
  - too frugal - cannot say no to a bargain even if they know the reason it is so cheap.
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- too materialistic - easy prey for loan sharks or get-rich-quick schemes.
- too greedy - the greedy and dishonest may fall prey to a psychopath who can easily entice them to act in an immoral way.
- too masochistic - lack self-respect and so unconsciously let psychopaths take advantage of them. They think they deserve it out of a sense of guilt.
- the elderly - the elderly can become fatigued and less capable of multi-tasking. When hearing a sales pitch they are less likely to consider that it could be a con. They are prone to giving money to someone with a hard-luck story. See elder abuse.

## Motivations of manipulators

Manipulators can have various possible motivations, including but not limited to:

- the need to advance their own purposes and personal gain at virtually any cost to others
- a strong need to attain feelings of power and superiority in relationships with others
- a want and need to feel in control (aka. control freak)
- a desire to gain a feeling of power over others in order to raise their perception of self-esteem
- boredom, or growing tired of his/her surroundings, seeing it as a game more than hurting others

## Psychological conditions of manipulators

Manipulators may have any of the following psychological conditions:

- machiavellian personality
- narcissistic personality disorder
- paranoid personality disorder
- borderline personality disorder
- dependent personality disorder
- histrionic personality disorder
- passive–aggressive behavior
- type A angry personalities
- antisocial personality disorder
- behavioral addiction

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[1] (reference for the entire section)

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