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Identification and Assessment of Human Manipulation in the Work Environment

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide an overview of knowledge related to the complexity of manipulation in the work environment and focus on the specification of the issue. The attributes of manipulation in the work environment were analyzed based on the degree of perception of social intelligence factors, the level of manipulation, and the tendency to distrust others. The aim of the research was to examine statistically significant associations between the number of years of service and the occurrence of manipulation in work. The research was carried out via MPS and MESI methodologies. The research sample (N = 183) comprised working students and employees from the private and public spheres from various work areas in Slovakia. In conclusion, no statistically significant associations existed between the number of worked years and manipulation at the workplace. Statistically, significant gender differences were documented in men within the attributes of manipulation. Higher average values for attributes of empathy, social irritability, and mistrust were found in women.

Keywords:

Human manipulation, Social intelligence, Work environment, Human management, MESI and MPS methodologies

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Theoretical Background Work Environment

The work environment consists of a few different factors based on the material and social conditions of work. The level of the working environment affects the employee's activities and job satisfaction. If an employee is in an uncomplimentary work environment, the workload increases, and health is endangered. It affects physical and socio-psychological factors (Kachaňáková, 2007). Although highly manipulative employees put their masks on and are

polite to others (Blickle et al., 2020), their amoral manipulation can still instantly break the social interaction balance with others at the workplace, leading to weakened work performance (O'Boyle et al., 2012). According to Gallie and Russell (2009), the work environment creates not only positive aspects but also difficult demands and pressures for the individual, which can cause a certain stress level.

The study of Ma et al. (2022) investigated whether job stressors such as role procedural unfairness, perceived competition, and ambiguity motivate manipulators to use amoral manipulation at work. Findings indicate that role ambiguity activates manipulators' manipulative behavior at work, which leads to reduced performance and less politeness toward others at the workplace. So, role ambiguity was identified as a crucial job stressor for manipulative individuals to apply manipulative behavior toward others.

Work engagement refers to the degree to which an employee is influenced by their work, and depending on the result of the engagement. This state can be satisfactory or unsatisfactory. People often point to their work's meaning if they like it and the lack of meaning in it if they dislike it. A positive attitude towards work often includes adequate earnings, fair superiors, and friendly co-workers. Young people are analyzing work ethic in modern business because they want a meaningful work environment these days (Kovaľová et al., 2018).

Nowadays, there exist tendencies toward the individualization of the working environment – adapting working conditions to the subjective needs of each worker. A person's performance is often determined by how they feel about their job and their attitude towards the company that employs them (Flimel, 2015).

Health professionals were studied for three years in research undertaken by the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen to estimate the risk of fluctuation due to a challenging employment environment. During the first year of the research, 9.2% of workers frequently reacted to a poor environment. In the second and third years, there was a strong correlation between frequent exposure to an unfavorable work environment and high turnover. This study also pointed to a correlation between worker health and working conditions. Three factors in the study highlighted why workers wanted to quit a job: bad leadership, constant exposure to negative behavior, and health problems that affect workers in the long term. As a result, organizations face excessive absenteeism and turnover, resulting in low productivity, low innovation, and diminishing job quality. All of this prevents a business from competing in a competitive economy, from hiring and retaining competent employees, encouraging a healthy work environment (Hogh et al., 2011). Negative behavior should not be tolerated in the workplace. It is also expensive for the organization. In addition, it destroys the company's goals, vision, and success.

The work environment consists of different factors based on the material and social conditions of work. The level of the working environment affects the employee's activity and job satisfaction. If an employee is in an unfavorable working environment, their workload increases, and their health may be at risk. This is mainly the effect of physical and social-psychological factors (Kachaňáková, 2007).

While many examiners have developed lists of potentially harmful and unethical behaviors at the workplace, the study of Torcka and Zagelmeyer (2022) seeks to understand the processes of manipulation, using a qualitative approach – to examine tactics (strategies) used by manipulators in relation to their goals, as well as the dynamics of manipulation.

Social Intelligence

The construct has been studied not only by social scientists for the past three decades but lately has acquired increasing attention. When interpreting human performance, a specific area is created by interpersonal situations and the behavior of a person in such situations (Eshghi et al., 2013). It is challenging to describe social intelligence since the construct is close to concepts such as competence and social skills. Moreover, other concepts like emotional (Goleman, 1995) and interpersonal (Hatch & Gardner, 1993) intelligence are relatively overlapping. Unquestionably, social intelligence is a multidimensional construct and has three components: perceptual, behavioral, and cognitive-analytical. In this sense, Björkqvist et al. (2000) consider the socially intelligent individual as a person who can produce behavior to achieve social goals.

Social intelligence can be seen as the ability to convince and win over people, to understand what they say or what they want to say (non-verbal expressions). Social intelligence also includes predicting people's behavior or detecting lies and forgery. It is characterized by high attentiveness and memory for events, names, and faces of people with whom we came into contact. A very important ability within social intelligence is empathizing with the other person's situation, that is, being able to empathize with people's needs, motives, and values. A socially intelligent person, of his own accord, wants to have a positive effect on his near surroundings; he should readily orient himself in a normal social environment and know how to deal with people and, if necessary, know how to manipulate them to a certain acceptable degree (Goleman, 2006). If we look at social intelligence from a historical point of view, it is clear from several definitions of social intelligence that social intelligence can be identified to a larger extent by the level of practical experience (there are people for whom orientation in the social environment is not a problem, they can quickly make an impression in society, they are communicative, etc.) than a theoretical definition (Frankovský, 2010).

Manipulation

Manipulation is nothing uncommon, not even in the workplace. It is a part of our lives. Individuals are different, some achieve their goals through their activity, and some use others. None of us is immune to manipulation. Manipulation manifests itself in various ways and forms that we often do not realize. In the worst case, it can destroy a person. One of the most important things is the realization of what manipulation is. The second thing is to want to do something about it. Manipulation tries to evoke needs and interests in the manipulated subjects so that the subsequent procedure corresponds to the goals of the manipulator (Reifová, 2004).

It interferes with human nature and behavior and cannot be avoided. Also, it is a universal phenomenon and a method of influencing. However, it also has negative meanings, as it always involves harming another person and gaining benefit from the manipulator. It is a complex process that combines different techniques and means (Čulenová, 2015).

The problem with manipulation is the absence of approval when the manipulated person does not act consciously. When manipulating, we talk about different degrees of severity and the extent to which the manipulator is aware of its actions. It is possible to manipulate completely unconsciously but also too consciously. Severe forms of manipulation in the work environment, which border with harassment, can be very difficult for the individual's mental health. For example, to gain control of a colleague, a superior alternates insults, criticism, tenderness, and flattery (Jílek, 2010).

Manipulation in the workplace may be avoided if you express your opinion clearly and are confident in your professional qualities by interrupting the conversation by phone call or pressing an urgent question. Even a simple change of discussion topic may help to avoid manipulation. In self-defense, the manipulated individual should not find themselves alone, but if they make a mistake, they will be expelled from the group very quickly. Sometimes all you have to do is adapt, reconsider your behavior, and be more open and benevolent, which will guarantee the well-being of everyone at work (Pospíšil, 2009).

Manipulation is a personality trait represented by manipulative interpersonal techniques and the willingness to control others (Brewer & Abell, 2017). Manipulative individuals are usually cynical, mysterious, and suspicious, bypassing norms and lacking empathy, and follow practical models (Ináncsi et al., 2015; 2016; Jaffé et al., 2019). Researchers hypothesized that manipulation might not be qualitatively dissimilar from psychopathy but a less extreme sub-clinical expression of it (e.g., Mealey, 1995). Within the organizational and work environment, manipulatives hold leading positions, from which manipulative individuals control others. They are less willing to connect to rules, focusing on their power over those around them (D'Souza, 2015). Manipulators are sensitive to the work and social context and can change tactics, from cooperation to competition, when essential (Czibor, 2012). They also spread gossip about co-workers, mask important work information, or find unpretentious ways to criticize others (Greenberg & Baron, 2013). Manipulators are distinguished by flexibility in using different strategies, from retreat to cooperation (depending on the context), to gain personal benefits.

Research Section

This research focuses on the issue of manipulating people in the workplace. The subject was evaluated in terms of managers and executive employees. Consequently, attention was paid to analyzing the results of these differences and associations. Aspects of manipulation of people in the work process were investigated in terms of selected sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (the years of service and respondents' gender). The research part presents the findings of the research, which examined the differences and associations of manipulation profiles of the selected sample via MESI (manipulation, empathy, social irritability) and MPS (Machiavellian Personality Scale) questionnaires. Data collection was carried out using the questionnaire method. The analyzed data were obtained via a research project and samples of respondents.

Because we have been working with people and have attended to publish about them anonymously, it was extremely important to respect research ethics – a certain standard of behavior that guided us during this process. The individuals had the right to withdraw from the research without any consequences. Subjects' participation in the research was deliberate, and individuals were not forced to participate in it. No form of overt or covert coercion was used to obtain consent to participate in the research.

Research Goal and Hypothesis

The research aimed to enrich the knowledge of an effective working environment based on the analysis of differences and associations between the attributes of manipulation and the factors of social intelligence of the respondents. Since the area of manipulation has become an important topic not only these days, especially in the context of defining the limits of the use

of manipulation techniques in the work process, we aimed to discover the extent that the manipulation is widespread, perceived, and distinguishable among men and women in their work environment; and its interference with behavior manners of every individual. Based on this research, goals were established:

- 1) to find out whether there are *associations* between sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (the number of years of service) and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment,
- 2) to find out whether there are *differences* between sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (the gender of respondents) and the occurrence of manipulation in their work environment.

Based on theoretical knowledge and established research goals, the following hypotheses were recognized (in accordance with the stated goal):

Hypothesis 1: We assume that there are statistically significant associations between the number of years of service and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment.

Hypothesis 2: We assume that there are statistically significant differences between the gender of employees and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment.

Method

Sample

The research was carried out from May to July 2022 on the territory of the Slovak Republic. Respondents were selected using a random sampling technique. They worked as employees in the private or public sector in various work fields. As part of the research (N = 183), respondents were approached, of which 121 were women (66.1%), and 62 were men (33.9%). The minimum age was 18 years, the maximum age was 60 years, and the average age was 29. In terms of their residence, 81 respondents (52.6%) lived in the city, and 73 (47.3%) lived in the countryside of Slovakia. In terms of their education, 103 respondents had secondary education (56.28%), and 80 had a university degree (43.72%). The average number of years of service was 7. From the set of values, the shortest number of years of service was 0, and the longest number was 42. The median was four years.

Instrument

The MESI Methodology (manipulation, empathy, social irritability)

It serves to determine social intelligence based on a psychometric approach. It presents a developmental continuation of the EMESI methodology (Frankovský & Birknerová, 2012), which was inspired by the PESI methodology developed by Kaukiainen et al. (1999). This methodology examined the degree of perception of social intelligence as a performance characteristic.

It contains ten items, and its internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) was .90. The MESI methodology consists of 21 items assessed on a 5-point scale (0 never – 4 very often). Three factors of social intelligence were extracted by factor analysis (the Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation):

1. *Manipulation*: People with higher scores in this factor can persuade others to do what they need. They understand how to convince and manipulate them. They also use lies for their benefit. Cronbach's alpha: .85.
2. *Empathy*: Higher-scoring individuals understand how to differentiate other people's intents, sentiments, and weaknesses in this factor. They are able to adjust to new individuals, anticipate their desires, and meet those wishes. Cronbach's alpha: .78.
3. *Social irritability*: People who achieved a higher score in this factor are concerned about contact with others. Other people's weaknesses and desires divert their focus. Adapting to other people causes them problems, and the feelings of others distract them. Individuals who are willing to do everything for them make them anxious. Cronbach's alpha: .71.

The replication study by Kaliská et al. (2019) offers research findings from verification of the construct validity of social intelligence by the Slovak MESI scale through CFA in two samples (secondary school students and university students). The findings confirm validation of the MESI questionnaire for assessing social intelligence and its possible application in targeted interventions in a school environment. Also, the validity of the presented MESI methodology was revealed in relation to Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) from Silvera et al. (2001). The comparison of the outcomes obtained using this questionnaire and the MESI brought several important findings to confirm the validity of the internal structure of the methodology.

The MPS Methodology (Machiavellian Personality Scale)

Dahling et al. (2009) created the original Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS) methodology to discover a predisposition to distrust and unethical manipulation. This methodology was developed to help leaders identify the degree of their manipulation. The idea is based on research on political and religious extremist groups whose leaders manipulate subordinates (Christie & Florence, 1970).

The methodology consists of 16 items and has an internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of .89. The items are assessed on a 5-point scale (1 disagree at all – 5 strongly agree). Four factors determining Machiavellianism (manipulation) were extracted by factor analysis (the Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation):

1. *Amorality*: Those who score higher in this category believe that lying will provide them an advantage over others. These people behave unethically if they believe it helps them to succeed. They understand how to use the facts to their advantage and have a lighthearted chat at first glance. They commonly undertake scams and might sabotage others if their aims are threatened. Cronbach's alpha: .79.
2. *Desire for social status*: Those who score higher in this factor understand that social status is a good indicator of future success. Their efforts are directed toward achieving material security and prosperity. These individuals aspire to be wealthy and powerful. Cronbach's alpha: .70.
3. *Desire for control*: Individuals who score higher in this factor enjoy controlling the situation. They give orders in interpersonal interactions, and total control over others satisfies them. Cronbach's alpha: .83.

4. *Distrust*: People that score higher in this factor dislike teamwork and do not trust others. If they are already part of a team, they pull the carpet from under someone in order to stand out. They are motivated only because of personal gain. They argue that if they reveal any weakness, others could take advantage of the circumstance without hesitation. They believe that individuals are plotting methods to profit from the situation on their behalf. Cronbach's alpha: .73.

Results

The implementation of the research project made it possible to characterize associations and differences in selected sociodemographic characteristics and the occurrence of manipulation techniques in the work environment.

Hypothesis 1. We examined statistically significant associations between the number of years of service of respondents and the occurrence of manipulating techniques in the work environment. Correlations were processed using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Table 1 shows the results of the H1, which examined the correlation between the number of years of service and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment. The H1 was not confirmed because there were no statistically significant associations between selected variables.

Table 1

Relationships between the Number of Years of Service and the Occurrence of Manipulation in the Workplace

		manipulation	empathy	social irritability	amorality	social status	control	distrust
the number of years of service	Pearson's correlation	.00	-.09	-.03	.07	-.08	-.03	-.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.96	.1	.67	.32	.23	.65	.92

Note. ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Hypothesis 2. We examined statistically significant differences in terms of gender within the occurrence of manipulation techniques in the work environment. The differences were processed using the mathematical-statistical method *t*-test.

Statistically significant differences between the gender of respondents and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment, within the MESI methodology, occurred in all attributes (Table 2): manipulation ($t = 2.47$; $p = .01$), empathy ($t = -2.30$; $p = .02$), social irritability ($t = -2.61$; $p = .01$). Within the manipulation attribute, higher average values were achieved by men. The results showed that men might sometimes persuade others to do almost anything, use others to their advantage at the cost of deception, and by acting, might convince people to do what they want and to stand by their side.

In terms of the empathy attribute, as a second factor of the MESI questionnaire, women achieved higher average values. The results of the research showed that women are more likely to use the aspects of empathy, they know how to adapt to new people, they can estimate the wishes of others, can behave in accordance with other people's feelings, and can estimate the feelings of others (even if they hide them), they know how to estimate the weaknesses of others, and are in contact with other people to recognize their intention.

Within the social irritation attribute, women achieved higher average scores. It implies that interaction with other people and their wishes make them nervous, and other people's sentiments and weaknesses distract them if they must adjust to new individuals. As a result, they feel uncomfortable and insecure when they must adapt to them.

Statistically significant differences between the gender of respondents and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment within the MPS methodology occurred in one attribute (Table 2): distrust ($t = -2.25, p = .02$). Women achieved higher average values. They are more motivated by personal gain, prefer individual work due to distrust of people, and do not like joining groups. They believe team members would stab in the back only to get ahead. They believe that if they show weakness at work, other people use it to their advantage and that others are always planning to take advantage of the situation at their expense. The H2 was confirmed because there were statistically significant differences between the gender of respondents and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment.

Table 2

Differences between Gender of Respondents and the Occurrence of Manipulation in the Workplace

		Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
MESI	manipulation	man	1.74	0.78	2.47	0.01
		woman	1.46	0.70		
	empathy	man	2.26	0.67	-2.30	0.02
		woman	2.46	0.51		
	social irritability	man	1.49	0.50	-2.61	0.01
		woman	1.72	0.60		
MPS	amorality	man	1.92	0.89	0.58	0.55
		woman	1.84	0.85		
	social status	man	3.10	1.00	1.46	0.14
		woman	2.89	0.90		
	control	man	2.56	0.98	0.98	0.32
		woman	2.42	0.95		
	distrust	man	2.65	0.80	-2.25	0.02
		woman	2.92	0.77		

Note. ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Discussion

The realization of the research project made it possible to characterize gender differences and associations between the examined characteristics. Based on the research goal, the analysis of statistically significant *associations* in terms of the selected sociodemographic data of respondents (years in the service) and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment was processed. The research examined statistically significant associations between the number of years of service and the occurrence of manipulation techniques in the work environment. Within the research results, there were no statistically significant associations. The results showed that the majority of older respondents did not show strong manipulative tendencies in the work environment.

However, according to Edelman and Larkin (2015), older and long-term employees face a more significant loss of self-esteem due to unfavorable social comparisons, and are more likely to engage in manipulation and deception in response to their performance that is lower

than that of their colleagues. Hyde et al. (2016) believe that indecent behavior and indirect aggression in the workplace are driven by individuals who tend to manipulate others. According to them, demographic factors, workplace factors, and employees' age do not significantly affect this behavior. Our research has confirmed these claims, and we dare to agree with them.

According to Maftai et al. (2022), there exist a significant, negative association between age and moral disengagement, which suggests that as individual ages, his moral disengagement decreases. And manipulation (and psychopathy) was significantly related to all moral disengagement mechanisms, except one: diffusion of responsibility. For better understanding, *the moral disengagement theory* (MD) (Bandura et al., 1996) explains why some individuals are able to engage in immoral behavior without guilt. Moral self-regulation can be deactivated (also activated) selectively – people may be liberated from the guilt and self-censorship that arise when they behave immorally (Qin et al., 2020).

The analysis of statistically significant *differences* in terms of selected sociodemographic data of respondents (gender) and the occurrence of manipulation in the work environment was processed. The research examined statistically significant differences in terms of gender within the occurrence of manipulation techniques in the work environment. Men achieved higher average scores in terms of the manipulation attribute within the MESI methodology when analyzing the statistically significant difference between the gender of respondents and the prevalence of manipulation in work. In terms of empathy, social irritability, and distrust attributes within MPS and MESI methodologies, women achieved higher average values. Our research shows that within the manipulation in work, men are more likely than women to persuade others to do almost anything and use others to their advantage at the cost of deception. Women are more likely to use characteristic traits of empathy, motivated by personal gain, and prefer individual work because of distrust of others. According to a study by Hyde et al. (2016), gender in the organization did not affect human perception as a goal. Malicious manipulation has targeted women and men who appear to have greater degrees of anxiety, depression, stress, and life dissatisfaction.

Research by Birknerová and Koval'ová (2016) indicates that men, just like women, can recognize manipulative behavior, know how to react to it appropriately and, if necessary, adequately defend themselves against it. However, concerning gender differences, it is necessary to realize that we are talking about tendencies towards a certain type of behavior, not about guaranteed and stereotyped manifestations.

Jonason et al. (2012) investigated the function of dark triad traits as a predictor of workplace manipulation techniques and how dark triad might mitigate gender differences in accepting strong (e.g., threats) and soft methods (e.g., compliments) (N = 419). Acceptance of hard techniques was connected with psychopathy and manipulation, whereas acceptance of soft methods was associated with narcissism and manipulation. Men are more likely than women to bear an aggressive or muscular style of interpersonal influence in the workplace due to the dark triad.

Stead (2016) investigated how personality characteristics, emotional intelligence, and gender influence a person's tendency to manipulate others in the workplace. Emotional intelligence predicted inauthentic types of emotional manipulation, primarily in women among Australian employees (N = 756). The degree of the associations between the parts of the Dark Triad and malevolent and insincere types of emotional manipulation was similar in women.

Both kinds of emotional manipulation were significantly associated with Machiavellianism in men, followed by narcissism and psychopathy. As a result, the greater emotional manipulation at work reflects women's overall anti-social behavior and men's relentless pursuit of goals (i.e., Machiavellian tendencies).

Limitations and Future Direction

The study, like every other research, has limitations due to self-selection and self-expression. Individuals with the most severe manipulation symptoms may not participate in the research. The findings, which indicate a plain situation in relation to the theme, still do not provide the impression that respondents' replies were inflated or otherwise altered. According to the current state of the topic – never-ending desire to manipulate others – we can claim that the influence can be played not only by individual features (personal traits) but also by culture or customs in parenting (genes or style of upbringing). For example, the uniqueness of women's positions in society, various working circumstances, the legal framework for their performance, and so on. This could explain findings about the influence of gender on the existence of manipulative tendencies among individuals. Since the article is informative and exploratory, we propose using meta-analyses that generate more accurate findings than individual research in the future.

Conclusion

The article described the theoretical knowledge of the researched issues related to human manipulation in the work environment. The area of manipulation has become an important topic, especially in defining the limits of using manipulation techniques in the work process. Through theoretical knowledge, we provided an overview of the topic of manipulation and the working environment. We also examined statistically significant differences and associations between manipulation and social intelligence that contains factors of manipulation. According to the results, it can be concluded that the area of manipulation in the work environment is a noteworthy topic in working life, even if within the H1, there were no statistically significant associations between the years of service and manipulation. It could be caused because of a random selection of the research sample. Elements of manipulation accompany us throughout our lives and affect almost all areas. In working with people, manipulation is present mainly in those places where people's guidance is required. The H2 has confirmed mutual gender differences within the attribute of *manipulation* in men and on the other side in women in attributes of *empathy*, *social irritability*, and *distrust*. Women have more empathy, are more motivated by personal gain, and prefer individual work due to mistrust of others.

It is possible to state that the field of manipulation is multidimensional since, from the point of view of research, it is possible to approach it from several perspectives. Regarding the control of manipulation and its knowledge, the situation is very complicated these days. There are differences in the use and perception of manipulation as an element of creating a positive working atmosphere compared to the use of manipulation as an element to achieve one's own goals, regardless of the personality of others. The knowledge obtained from our research could contribute to the definition of the correct perception and at least partial elimination of manipulation of people in the work environment.

Declarations

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