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AWARENESS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES AMONG IT SECTOR EMPLOYEES

Introduction

Manipulation is present in all areas of human life irrespectively of age, gender or views. It concerns both situations in private life (in partner relationships, parent-child relationships) and professional life (superior – employee or seller – customer relationships). The ubiquity of these techniques in correlation with a low awareness of society about their impact makes people particularly vulnerable to adverse actions of people who are familiar with them.

The article discusses the fundamentals of psychological manipulation techniques and the concepts of psychomanipulation and social impact. Moreover, a thesis is presented that general or even partial familiarization with the issue of manipulation is sufficient for the public to significantly increase its ability to recognize this phenomenon. In addition, survey results are presented concerning the awareness level of the use of manipulation techniques among IT sector employees.

1. Definitions of manipulation and psychomanipulation

Manipulation is a natural form of exerting influence on other individuals (or society) to induce them to make (unconsciously) a decision that is favorable to the person exerting influence. One can manipulate both in terms of content and particular methods of action¹. Manipulation is an act where the manipulator does not consider the interest of the individual on whom the influence is exerted. Only the manipulator 's benefit is important².

Psychomanipulation is a narrower concept which refers to influence mechanisms that use basic principles of psychology controlling the course of human conduct³.

¹ T. Witkowski, *Psychomanipulacje. Jak je rozpoznać i jak sobie z nimi radzić?*, Oficyna Wydawnicza UNUS, 2000, p. 25.

² D. Doliński, *Psychologia wpływu społecznego*, Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ossolineum, Wrocław 2000, p. 8.

³ T. Witkowski, *Psychomanipulacje. Jak je rozpoznać i jak sobie z nimi radzić?*, op. cit., p. 26.

Social influence is a much wider concept. It consists in changing the behavior, attitudes or emotions experienced by individuals as a result of the actions of other people. This phenomenon takes various forms – from openly overt to completely hidden ones⁴.

2. Social influence

Social influence is an action as a result of which an individual, a group or an institution causes changes in the cognitive and/or behavioral sphere of human activity⁵.

Robert Cialdini, a professor in Arizona State University and the author of one of the most significant publications on social influence, *Influence - science and practice*⁶, distinguishes six rules of exerting influence. According to him, situations where people agree to comply with the requests/orders/commands of others are based on one of the rules⁷. The rules that can be used to exert influence are⁸:

- reciprocity – at the moment of receiving a present/a favor the recipient loses his/her independence in relation to the giver and feels obliged to reciprocate in the future
- commitment and consistency - the principle works in the idea that a feeling of consequence and/or commitment is aroused, which significantly increases the chances of reaching an objective; decisions (even if erroneous) made with commitment affirm themselves⁹,
- social proof – the principle consists in the fact that individuals will find their actions correct when they see other people behaving in a similar way,
- liking – individuals are willing to comply with the requests of people who they like; the level of liking other person depends on such factors as physical attractiveness, similarity, compliments, maintaining contacts or the desire to cooperate,
- authority – humans have a natural inclination to submit to people who are authorities to them,
- scarcity – people attribute bigger value to opportunities that are becoming inaccessible¹⁰.

⁴ D. Doliński, *Wpływ, a jakość życia*, Wydawnictwo SWPS, Warszawa 2002, p. 35.

⁵ T. Witkowski, *Psychomanipulacje. Jak je rozpoznać i jak sobie z nimi radzić?*, op. cit., p. 26.

⁶ R. Cialdini, *Influence- science and practice*, audiobook Amazon, 2014.

⁷ D. Doliński, *Wpływ, a jakość życia*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁸ R. Cialdini, *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi. Teoria i praktyka*, GWP, Gdańsk 2012, p. 5 [EPUB e-book].

⁹ W. Warecki, M. Warecki, *Słowo o manipulacji*, Poltext, Warszawa 2000, p. 142.

¹⁰ W. Warecki, M. Warecki, *Słowo o manipulacji*, op. cit., p. 142.

However, one should bear in mind that while such a presentation of the problem organizes and simplifies it in a significant way, numerous researchers disagree with the psychological basis of the above principles¹¹. As a result, they may be disputed.

Social influence may be a conscious, intentional action. It can also be an unconscious behavior – this happens when the person does not realize that his/her behavior affects the way of thinking, the behavior or the emotions of another person¹².

3. Automatic reactions

Due to the lack of time, humans are not able to analyze every situation they encounter. People develop shortcuts and reactions that work flawlessly saving them a lot of time. Automatic reactions, that is fixed patterns of reaction, are based on complex sequences of actions (e.g. courtship or mating rituals). It is worth noting that the pattern that makes up particular behavior is always similar; its form or sequence does not change – it resembles recording on a tape and its subsequent playback¹³.

Because of one's own automatism, humans can frequently be subject to manipulation. They are forced to use automatic reactions that most frequently arise as a result of habits or customs and are completely natural. Ellen Langer claims that most of our lives involves such behaviors¹⁴. Without such single, stereotypical indicators that guide our behavior, we would have to freeze in order to evaluate, store and assess various properties of the encountered objects or events while the opportunity to react adequately would irretrievably disappear. Moreover, everything indicates that human dependence on indicators that automatically control people's behavior will increase in the future. The increasing number and complexity of stimuli will force humans to take shortcuts¹⁵.

Humans develop the so-called cognitive models – structures that help organize their knowledge¹⁶. The models can control the consciousness – their functioning is presented below (Scheme 1. Human cognitive model).

¹¹ D. Doliński, *Psychologia wpływu społecznego*, op. cit., p. 9.

¹² T. Witkowski, *Psychomanipulacje. Jak je rozpoznać i jak sobie z nimi radzić?*, op. cit., p. 26.

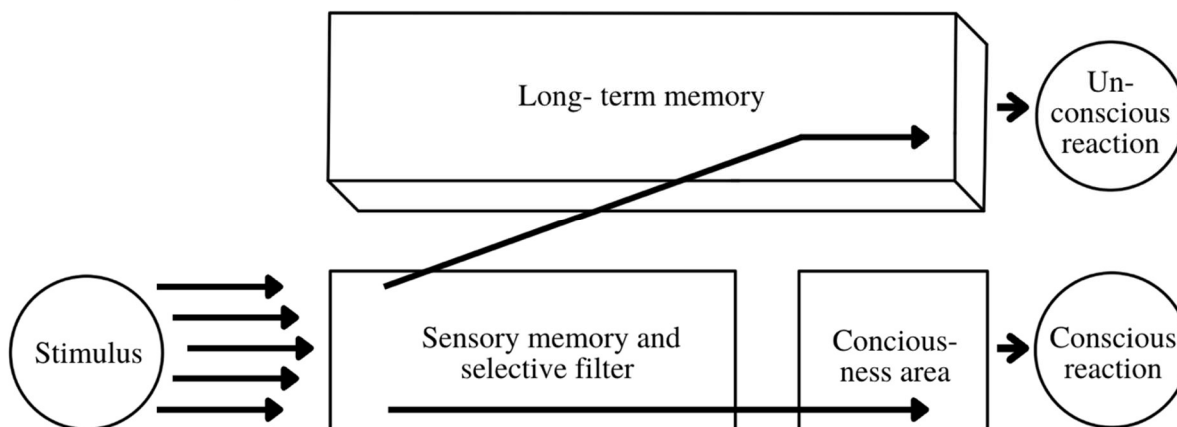
¹³ R. Cialdini, *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi. Teoria i praktyka*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁴ R. Cialdini, *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi. Teoria i praktyka*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁵ R. Cialdini, *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi. Teoria i praktyka*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁶ E. Aronson, T. Wilson, R. Akert, *Psychologia społeczna. Serce i umysł*, Zysk i s-ka, Poznań 2012, p. 684.

Scheme 1. Human cognitive model



Source: Author's own study based on D. Goleman, *Vital lies, simple truths*, Bloomsbury Publishing, Londyn 1998, p. 86.

In the case of an unconscious reaction, information passes directly from “cache” memory to the memory filter, bypassing completely the consciousness area. The course of the reaction also remains beyond consciousness. This path is followed by routine activities and other unconscious phenomena. It should be noted that thanks to this two channels of perception and action can operate simultaneously: one in the consciousness are and the other as the unconscious one¹⁷.

4. How to recognize manipulation and protect against it

When the basics of manipulation techniques are known, it is much easier to recognize the attempts to use them and, consequently, to defend against them. The best way to recognize them is to observe interlocutors and their nontypical gestures or behaviors. They may include:

- causing feelings of confusion, uncertainty, fear or embarrassment,
- ignoring comments, attempts to challenge arguments,
- frequent changes of position, ambiguous messages,
- sudden changes of topic, constant interruptions or interjections to conversation.

It should be remembered that this may not be an attempt to manipulate if the above feelings appear sporadically. It may be simply caused by malaise or fatigue of the interlocutor¹⁸.

¹⁷ D. Goleman, *Konieczne kłamstwa, proste prawdy*, Albatros, Warszawa 1999, p. 87.

¹⁸ C. Grötzebach, *Uwaga, manipulacja! Jak rozpoznać nieuczciwe metody perswazji?*, BC Edukacja, Warszawa 2008, p. 56.

In defense against manipulation, three techniques are used when looking for different perspectives on solving the problem¹⁹:

- question the current way of operating and, as a result, try other methods that were not used previously,
- use the devil's advocate technique to assess and criticize the approach,
- include into the team people with a wide range of competences and different views.

5. Methodology and the results of own research

The object of the survey was to determine the perception of IT employees and the level of their awareness of psychological manipulation techniques. Three research questions were asked:

- how do IT sector employees assess their familiarity level with manipulation techniques,
- are IT sector employees aware of the use of manipulation techniques,
- is the use of manipulation ethical in the opinion of IT sector employees.

The survey was conducted in two groups of IT sector employees, 30 people each. The age of respondents was within the range of 25- 57; the groups comprised both men and women (with a majority of men); all of them had higher education in IT.

The research method was an anonymous questionnaire conducted on Google Forms. In one group the respondents completed the form before they were made acquainted with the widely understood concept of manipulation. In the other group the forms were completed after the respondents listened to a 60-minute lecture on exerting influence and manipulation. The lecture presented the basics of manipulation techniques, influence instruments, the basics of transactional analysis²⁰ and the theory of the Karpman Drama Triangle²¹.

It can be concluded on the basis of the survey results that even superficial familiarization with the issue of manipulation significantly increases the respondents' knowledge. The respondents in group I (unacquainted with the subject) assessed their knowledge on the average at the level of 2.65 in a 5-degree scale, while in group II (acquainted with the subject) the assessment reached the value of 4.0. This shows that some basic presentation of the problem

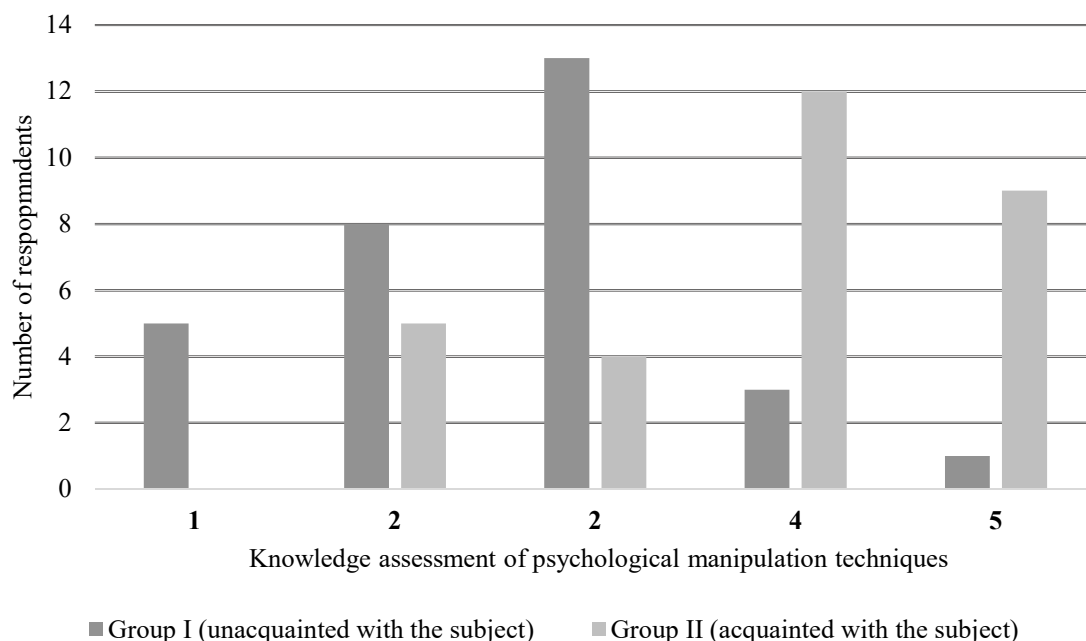
¹⁹ T. Tyszką, *Psychologiczne pułapki oceniania i podejmowania decyzji*, GWP, Gdańsk 2000, p. 78.

²⁰ Transactional analysis – a model of interpersonal relationships concept developed by Eric Berne (C. Grötzebach, *Uwaga, manipulacja! Jak rozpoznać nieuczciwe metody perswazji?*, BC Edukacja, Warszawa 2008, p. 26).

²¹ Karpman's Triangle – a scheme of playing the roles of Victim, Persecutor or Rescuer, developed by Stephen Karpman (R. i U. Dehner, *W co oni grają?*, Wydawnictwo Helion, Warszawa 2009, p. 24).

is enough to increase significantly (as much as by 1.35) the awareness level of manipulation techniques. The results are given in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Knowledge assessment of psychological manipulation techniques



Source: Author's own research.

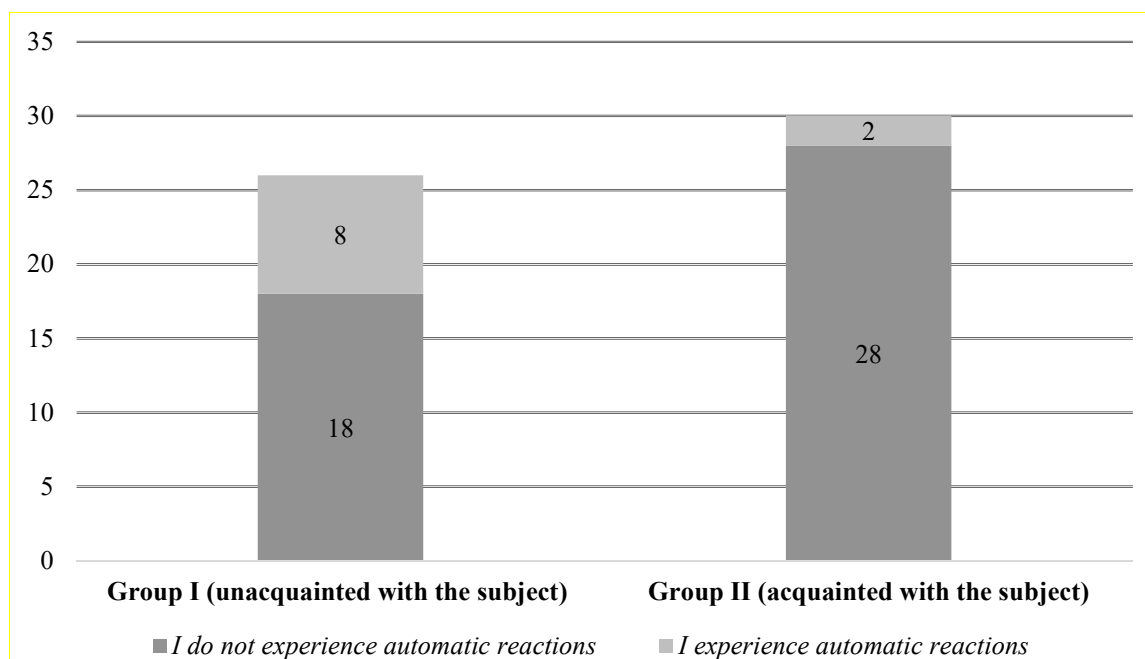
After discussing the issue of manipulation, a significant change could be observed in the respondents with regard to the acceptance of the conscious use of manipulation techniques in everyday and professional life.

The respondents in group I were more likely to accept a conscious use of manipulation techniques while in group II the majority of respondents condemned them. In addition, group II showed a significantly higher awareness of manipulation-related hazards.

The significantly higher respondents' awareness level of the use of manipulation was clearly revealed by questions on automatic reactions. Almost 60% of the respondents in group I indicated that they do not make decisions unconsciously. However, in another question showing a woman in a medical coat, practically all of them said that *seeing a person in a lab coat and with a stethoscope around his/her neck, I am sure I am looking at ...* They did not take into consideration any other variables and they based their knowledge on the so-called

heuristics judgements, i.e. simplified rules of thinking²² which are based on automatic reactions. Thus, one can conclude that even if a person is not aware of the principles of operation of certain techniques (or behaviors) – they can be used effectively. It should also be mentioned that the awareness in the group that was acquainted with the subject increased to 93% respondents. The figures are given in Graph 2.

Graph 2. Awareness of the use of unconscious reactions in everyday life

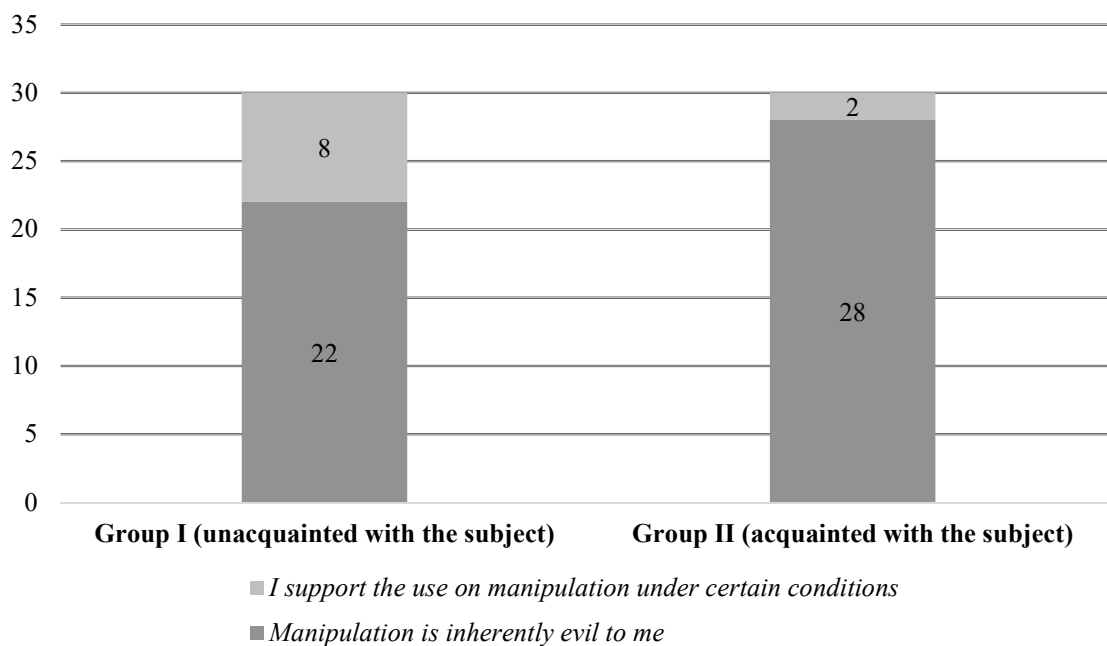


Source: Author's own research.

The aim of the lecture and the survey, apart from helping the respondents against manipulation, was to make them aware of the fact that manipulation is often used unconsciously. The respondents in group II did not only give a higher degree of attention to the attempts of manipulation but also they were aware that they themselves happen to exert influence on the others. While over 20% of the respondents in group I indicated that they absolutely did not use manipulation techniques with their relatives and co-workers, the respective number in group II decreased to almost 7%.

The figure that is particularly worth emphasizing is the number of individuals in both groups who clearly considered manipulation to be *inherently evil*.

²² <https://mfiles.pl/pl/index.php/Heurystyka>, accessed: 22.08.2022

Graph 3. Consent to use manipulation techniques

Source: Author's own research.

In group I, which was not prepared in any way before the survey, as many as 74.2% respondents were against using manipulation techniques while in group II the number reached 90%. This shows that manipulation is not accepted by society even when the knowledge about it is not extensive.

Conclusions

The survey showed that the knowledge about the use of manipulation techniques is very low among IT sector employees – a group of professionals with a high level of competence. The presentation of the basic rules of exerting influence and manipulation techniques significantly increases the respondents' awareness level in this area. In addition, people familiarized with the issue find the use of manipulation techniques unethical and socially unacceptable. Moreover, the survey showed how high is the level of unawareness of the use of the basic techniques of exerting influence which was evidenced by the use of automatic reactions.

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Abstract

The article presents concepts in the area of social influence, manipulation and awareness. It discusses the results of the Author's own research which show that the knowledge of IT employees on manipulation techniques is very low. Moreover, a high level of the respondents' unawareness was found of the use of basic manipulation techniques in everyday and professional life. The knowledge of the issues of exerting influence and manipulation significantly increases the awareness level in this area and their sensitivity to manipulation techniques and it makes humans consider such techniques unethical and socially unacceptable.

Key words

Manipulation, social influence, exerting influence, IT sector.