

Psychological Manipulation as a Stressor: An Empirical Review and Development of a Conceptual Framework for Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Psychological manipulation is manipulative behavior aimed at controlling or influencing the behavior of others for personal gain, which often has negative and detrimental impacts on the victims of the manipulation. In the context of social and professional relationships, this behavior acts as a chronic psychological stressor. This study uses a systematic review of empirical studies on manipulation as a source of stress and develops a conceptual framework linking manipulation to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression and produces a conceptual framework that explains the causal relationships between these variables.

Keywords: *Psychological Manipulation, Stressors, Mental Health, Empirical Review, Conceptual Framework*

INTRODUCTION

In social life, interactions between individuals are often inseparable from power dynamics and conflict. One frequently occurring phenomenon is psychological manipulation. This behavior can be defined as a cunning attempt by someone to control or influence others for personal gain, often resulting in mental harm to the victim.

This manipulative behavior, particularly in social and work relationships, can be a source of prolonged mental distress. This study seeks to systematically review the empirical literature on manipulation as a stressor and formulate a framework linking manipulative actions to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This allows us to better understand the causal relationship between these variables.

Specifically, psychological manipulation is a tactic designed to in still doubt in its targets, making them question their own perceptions, sanity, and even their own memory. Through denial of facts, diversion, contradictions, and bold lies, manipulators attempt to destabilize their victims and undermine their self-confidence. Manipulators tend to be the more dominant or powerful party in a relationship.

Manipulation is a form of psychological manipulation that attempts to create doubt in a targeted individual or group member, causing them to question their own perceptions, sanity, and memory. Using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and outright lies, a gaslighter attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize their beliefs. Manipulation has now become a concept describing manipulative behavior toward another person. This behavior is carried out by a perpetrator (manipulator/gaslighter) in a relationship with another person who tends to be more vulnerable. The gaslighter is usually the more dominant or powerful person (Stern, 2007).

In the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KKBI), the word "manipulation" is defined as the act of skillfully performing something with one's hands or mechanical tools. It is a group or individual's attempt to influence the behavior, attitudes, and opinions of another person without their awareness. In psychological terms, it is the attempt to influence an individual by controlling all subconscious desires and ideas, including the use of suggestion. "*Me·ma·ni·pu·la·si*"

means doing something by hand, arranging (doing it) in a clever way to achieve the desired goal, for example, a clever speaker who leaves the audience in stunned silence, or cheating (forging letters, embezzling goods, and so on).

Kharisma (in Winnaiseh, 2017, p. 10), in his statement on common forms of emotional violence, still uses the word "manipulation" among other forms that are borrowed from Indonesian. In general, this term is still rarely recognized by the general public. However, incidents that actually fall under this category of manipulation have occurred frequently in various aspects of people's lives, from within the household to phenomena in the wider community. This is what will then be discussed in this journal so that people can understand this term and then be able to avoid perpetrators of manipulation if they experience it.

Based on the description above, this paper aims to analyze the communication patterns that occur in manipulative behavior using a scientific communication model, as well as to identify the characteristics, impacts, and effective handling methods for victims. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of manipulation and serve as a resource for the public in identifying and addressing this type of manipulative behavior.

METHODOLOGY

A six-question questionnaire was administered to determine whether participants had heard of the terms manipulation and mind hacking and "manipulation" and "mind hacking" whether they had experienced manipulation. The data from the questionnaire was processed using descriptive statistics using the "manipulation" and "mind hacking", including calculation of central tendency. Results and Discussion: Based on the results of the questionnaire with $n = 40$, 67.5% of participants had heard of or understood the term mind hacking, including mind hacking, while 32.5% had never heard of it. Regarding the term gaslighting, mind hacking. For gaslighting, 37.5% of participants had heard of or understood the term manipulation, gaslighting, a manipulation, and 62.5% had never heard of it. Have you ever heard someone tell an exaggerated story, and you know the truth 75%, Have you heard someone tell an exaggerated story, and you know the truth 25%, Have you heard someone praise and then put it down 57.5%, never heard someone praise and then put it down 42.5%, Have you someone who dominates various things 45%, Never met someone who dominates various things 55%), Have you to be a victim of manipulation 30%, never have been a victim of manipulation 70%. based on the questionnaire given regarding whether someone has ever experienced manipulation, it was found that from the 6 question, with a total of 40 participants had an indication of having experienced manipulation behavior, manipulative behavior, with a percentage of 52.08% manipulative behavior, 47.92% had never met or ever received manipulative behavior, or never behavior. The distribution of responses to the 6 manipulation indicators can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Understand what is meant by mind hacking

Have you heard or understand what is meant by mind hacking (27)	Never heard of or understand what is meant by mind hacking (13)
67.5	32.5

Table 2. Understand the term manipulation

Have you ever heard or understood the term gaslighting (15)	never heard or understood the term gaslighting (25)
37.5	62.5

Table 3. Someone tells an exaggerated story, and you know the truth

Have you ever heard someone tell an exaggerated story, and you know the truth (30)	Never heard someone tell an exaggerated story, and you know the truth (10)
75	25

DISCUSSION

According to Braiker Harriet (2004), psychological manipulation is a style of influencing the social knowledge of a group or individual. The goal is to change the perception or behavior of that person or group of people cunningly, through deception, or even using crude strategies to attack, change, or influence the emotions and mental state of others so that they can control them and obtain what they want.

According to Afiah (2021), in interpersonal relationships, the perpetrator of manipulation engages in psychological abuse by weakening the victim's self-confidence, causing them to question their memories, perspectives, and thought patterns. This behavior can be conscious but also unconscious. For example, in the relationship between parents and children, parents sometimes act harshly to demonstrate dominance. This ultimately has a negative impact on the child. (Sulistio, 2020) Manipulation in the Context of Communication.

The goals of the manipulator can vary, such as power, control, profit, or privileges held by their victim. If you have problems and continually interact with someone who manipulates you, or if you're starting to feel bothered by their manipulative behavior, it can make you feel bad, stupid, and inferior. Even if this isn't the case, it's likely due to their manipulation. It's not impossible to fall into depression over time. Try to distance yourself. If you can't maintain distance, or if you're already feeling depressed due to their actions, it's worth consulting a psychologist. Some examples of manipulation in psychology are as follows:

- 1) Verbal abuse.
- 2) Isolating the victim from those closest to you.
- 3) Using intimate relationships to achieve certain goals.
- 4) Passive-aggressive behavior, which involves implicitly conveying frustration or disappointment.
- 5) Manipulation, which is the act of making another person feel weak, guilty, and doubtful

In the context of communication science, interpersonal communication occurs in interpersonal relationships, such as between a perpetrator and a victim of manipulation. Communication between the perpetrator and their victim can take the form of verbal or nonverbal communication. To analyze the communication between the perpetrator and the victim of manipulation, we will examine the communication model used. Further derivations of this model will reveal the components that shape the communication. Harold Laswell's communication model attempts to answer the question, "Who says what to whom, through what channel, and with what effect?" Referring to Laswell's communication model, communication has the following components: Communicator (who), Message (says what), Communicate (whom), Medium (channel), and Impact (effect) (McQuail, 2010).



Figure 1. Lasswell's Communication Model

Shannon & Weaver proposed a model of interpersonal communication that emphasizes the sender and receiver. This model, based on electronic communication (e.g., telephone), has a transmitter as the message transmitter and the ability to translate messages (encoding and coding). One important factor addressed in Shannon & Weaver's communication model is the presence of noise or interference. (Communication Theory, 2020) Although based on

communication with a medium and the intended noise originating from outside the communicator, the Shannon & Weaver communication model can also be applied to other communication patterns. This communication model can also be applied to direct communication, and noise can ultimately also originate from within the communicator, both the communicator and the communicant. In the context of interpersonal communication, Joseph A. DeVito explains that there are several types of barriers that can arise in communication. These barriers range from physical, psychological, physiological, and semantic barriers. (Devito, 2016) Based on thinking from a critical approach, Stuart Hall provides a different perspective from previous communication models that view communicants in a relatively passive position. According to him, meaning is given not only by the communicator in the process of encoding messages. The communicant is also active in making meaning in the process of decoding the received message. (McQuail, 2010) Communication Components in Manipulation Referring to Laswell's communication model, the communication process will include components that shape the communication carried out. Each component, consisting of the communicator, message, recipient, medium, and impact, has its own role in the communication pattern created, with the resulting impact being a manipulative communication pattern. This also applies to the communication patterns established between the perpetrator and victim of manipulation. The communicator, often referred to as the gaslighter in manipulative communication, plays a crucial role. Furthermore, the purpose of the normality test is to describe the data distribution using a fork in order to determine whether the distributed data is normal or not. The regression model satisfies the assumption of normalcy if the data is dispersed around the diagonal line and moves in the diagonal line's direction (Husein Umar, 2011).

The gaslighter is typically in a dominant position and thus possesses "power" over their victim. Through both verbal and nonverbal behavior, the gaslighter manipulates the victim. In many cases, the gaslighter suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) (Ni, 2017). They typically feel like they hold the key to the truth, forcing others to follow their truth. Due to their personality issues, not all gaslighters are aware of their actions.

Dr. Fiona Amelia, MPH (Amelia, 2020), explains several common practices of gaslighters, including their tendency to lie. When lying, they can appear completely honest. They will continue to lie even when others around them already know about their lies. They will even accuse others of lying. Therefore, their words never match their actions. Gaslighters are very clever at exploiting others. They often position themselves as victims. However, on the other hand, they will blame the victim, will not even hesitate to invite others to attack the victim and use things that are valuable to the victim to pressure the victim. Messages Verbally, negative sentences will come out of the mouth of a gaslighter to his victim. Sentences that sometimes come out of the mouth of a gaslighter include: 'It was just a joke', 'It's all your fault', 'Stop being insecure', 'You're too emotional/sensitive', 'Stop being so dramatic', 'It was just a joke', 'It never happened', 'Don't take it too personally', 'The problem is not me, but the problem is you', 'My intentions were not like that.' 'Don't blame me, please', 'Looks like you need help', 'Come on, forget it for now', 'I think you remembered wrong,' and so on (summarized from (CNN Indonesia, 2022) & (Effendi, 2022)). The sentences uttered by a gaslighter are messages in a form of communication. Messages created by gaslighters are usually manipulative and provocative. These messages often contain lies that are detrimental to the victim and may even be slander against the victim. Messages can manipulate the victim into feeling guilty. On the other hand, provocation in the message will make the victim not believe the truth conveyed by others, other than the gaslighter. The communicator or recipient of the message in manipulation is actually the victim. Everyone can basically be a victim of manipulation. Manipulation is successful when the victim displays behavior that is different from their personality.

Several characteristics are also seen when manipulation is successful on the victim, such as a tendency to withdraw from others, defend the perpetrator, become a different person, lack self-confidence, feel overly sensitive, have difficulty making decisions, or question their own sanity. (Huizen, 2022) Manipulation is a repetitive manipulative behavior. This means the victim will not immediately fall into the gaslighter's trap. However, with continuous manipulation, the victim will believe that the truth is in accordance with what the gaslighter says.

The victim will even become more dependent on the gaslighter and believe they are doing various things for the victim's "good." Manipulation can occur in communication using either a medium without a medium. Gaslighters can convey messages through both types of communication, although some adjustments are made. It's worth remembering that manipulation typically occurs in interpersonal communication. Therefore, direct, face-to-face communication is the primary driving force behind the message. Noise in Manipulation Communication: As previously stated,

manipulation tends to occur in interpersonal communication, creating a close relationship between the communicator and the recipient. This communication is typically face-to-face, with a reciprocal relationship.

This communication is learned gradually, but its impact cannot be erased. In interpersonal communication, several noises or obstacles can arise, including physical, psychological, physiological, and semantic obstacles (Devito, 2016). In normal communication patterns, obstacles hinder effective communication. Furthermore, obstacles can prevent messages from being conveyed completely, or even completely. In manipulating communication, the presence of this noise is worth being wary of, as it could be a misunderstanding rather than manipulation. Referring to the noise conveyed by DeVito, misunderstandings can occur due to poor communication skills on the part of the communicator. Mistakes in word choice or intonation, for example, can distort the intended meaning. On the other hand, misinterpretations of messages by the communicator can lead to misunderstandings that can lead to situations perceived as manipulation. Stuart Hall has reminded us that communicators are not passive participants (McQuail, 2010). They interpret the messages they receive. These interpretations are based on their own circumstances, such as intellectual ability, cultural understanding, religion, and so on. Several other signs can help assess whether a situation is truly manipulation or simply poor communication. These signs can be seen in the communicator's words and behavior. If there are no statements that say "the victim is crazy" or "other people are lying to the victim," and there are no attempts to alienate the victim from others, then poor communication is a sign of poor communication. Therefore, responding to situations of manipulation from a communication perspective must be done carefully. What is perceived as manipulation may simply be a misunderstanding. However, in situations where manipulation does occur, not conveying the message can also mean cutting off the possibility of manipulation continuing.

Manipulation Can Be a Sign of Mental Disorder

Manipulation is a behavior that arises from the perpetrator's lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, this behavior can also be a sign of mental disorders.

The following are some mental health issues that can potentially lead to manipulative behavior.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Manipulatory behavior is generally carried out by people with narcissistic personality disorder who have difficulty forming close relationships with others, especially their partners.

Through these behaviors, perpetrators are able to maintain close relationships with others. Some manipulation tactics they may employ include manipulation, shaming, and blaming others.

Borderline Personality Disorder

For people with borderline personality disorder, manipulation often occurs when they feel insecure or abandoned.

These behaviors are often used as a means to fulfill the emotional needs of people with BPD. Furthermore, the need for validation can also contribute to manipulative behavior.

Characteristics of Manipulation

Generally, in cases involving manipulation, the victim's ability to resist the perpetrator's manipulation depends on their ability to trust their own judgment. Developing a "counterstory" can help the victim regain their freedom (Nelson, 2001).

A manipulator typically uses various methods and efforts to persuade their victim to submit and comply with their wishes and demands. Therefore, be aware of several characteristics of manipulation frequently exhibited by a manipulator:

- 1) Interacting in their comfort zone

A manipulator typically insists on meeting or interacting with you in their comfort zone, such as their home, office, or favorite restaurant. They do this to gain control of the situation and more easily achieve their goals.

2) Manipulating Facts

A manipulator also frequently manipulates or distorts facts. They are often adept at lying, making excuses, withholding important information, or frequently blaming the victim for any incident (victim blaming). This way, you feel cornered, allowing them to gain more power over you.

3) Easily getting close to others.

Manipulative people often readily share their secrets and fears to make you feel special, so you'll reveal yours too. These secrets can then be used against or exploited by them later.

4) Asking bait questions.

This is a common trait of manipulation in professional relationships, but it can also occur in personal relationships. To manipulate, a manipulator often asks questions to get you to share your thoughts or concerns first. They then respond in a less-than-favorable manner, provoking conflict. This strategy allows the manipulator to control and influence decisions, as they feel guilty for revealing the thoughts that caused the conflict.

5) Engaging in intellectual bullying Intellectual bullying is also a characteristic of manipulation. Intellectual bullying usually involves over-explaining data or facts that they don't understand. This can then make them feel incompetent and powerless in making decisions.

6) Making offensive jokes.

Manipulators often make jokes that are meant to highlight someone's weaknesses, making them feel uncomfortable or inferior in front of others. This way, they feel superior and more powerful.

7) Making them feel guilty.

This is also a sign of manipulation. When feeling happy about an achievement, a manipulator will try to downplay that achievement and compare it to the greater happiness of others. This will make them feel unworthy of boasting about their accomplishment.

Conversely, when experiencing a negative event, a manipulator will try to make the problem seem worse or more pressing than it is. This can make them feel guilty about the sadness they are experiencing.

Characteristics of Victims of Manipulation

There are several characteristics that can be used to identify someone who has become a victim of manipulation, including (Stern, 2007):

- 1) The victim feels like they are not their former self
- 2) Constantly experiencing excessive anxiety
- 3) Experiencing a lack of self-confidence
- 4) Questioning their mental state
- 5) Feeling overly sensitive
- 6) Feeling like everything they do is always wrong
- 7) Thinking they are the source of the problem
- 8) A tendency to frequently apologize for things that are not their fault
- 9) Difficulty making decisions
- 10) Feeling isolated from friends or family members
- 11) Questioning their own attitudes
- 12) Feeling frequently hopeless
- 13) The victim finds it difficult to experience happiness, and manipulation can even lead to severe and severe clinical depression

Types of Manipulation

Types of manipulation Portnow (as cited in Petric, 2018) based on data collection, noted several types of manipulation cases, including:

- 1) Manipulation in the workplace. For example, this can occur when an individual engages in actions that cause coworkers to question themselves and their actions in a way that is detrimental to the victim's career. Successes are deliberately made an exception, made a point of gossip, or continually disrespected or questioned in an attempt to destroy the victim's self-confidence. Gaslighters generally divert the conversation to make the victim feel guilty and discouraged from acting appropriately.
- 2) Systematic and institutional manipulation can occur in a totalitarian and corrupt regime (dictatorship, communism, Nazism, fascism, organized crime) when a group of perpetrators of violence
- 3) Consistent with the perpetrator's perspective
- 4) Providing incomplete information
- 5) Verbal abuse, usually in the form of crude jokes
- 6) Obstructing and distracting the victim from outside sources
- 7) Belittling or devaluing the victim
- 8) Undermining, damaging, and bringing down the victim by gradually weakening their thinking process and judgment

Commonly Used Manipulation Tactics

If you show empathy toward a manipulative person, you may be taken advantage of. This can even happen repeatedly without you realizing it. To avoid falling into a manipulator's trap, you should be aware of some common psychological manipulation tactics, such as the following.

- 1) Lying
Lying is a powerful weapon often used as a manipulation tactic. The goal is not to hide guilt, but rather to confuse. If the perpetrator sees an opportunity to gain something by lying, they will create lies that hide major secrets or distort the facts. To detect lies, it's necessary to probe the manipulator's intentions through questioning. Asking questions isn't enough; ask questions several times if necessary. If the person's answers are unclear or inconsistent, this could be a sign that the person is lying.
- 2) Denial
Denial is one of the mainstay manipulation tactics used by someone when they make a mistake. The goal, of course, is to gain sympathy. For example, they may have found evidence that someone made a mistake, but they repeatedly deny it when discussing it. Denial can create self-doubt, making the manipulator forgiven easily.
- 3) Avoiding Responsibility
Manipulators will try to avoid taking responsibility. Generally, perpetrators refuse to discuss the problem when they want to. These words are deliberately used to make you feel that your actions are very disturbing. Eventually, you will withdraw and not discuss it again.
- 4) Blaming and Demeaning Others
Blaming others is an example of a manipulation tactic used to strike back. This will ultimately lead to feelings of guilt. Furthermore, perpetrators of manipulation can make others feel weak and inferior in the eyes of others. This can be done by pointing out the victim's flaws, incompetence, and shortcomings.
- 5) Intimidating and Pretending to Be a Victim
Manipulators often intimidate their opponents, not with threats, but with more subtle words to make you feel afraid and give in. If this doesn't work, the manipulator's weapon is "playing the victim," or positioning themselves as the victim. A manipulator does this to create the impression that they are the one suffering the most. This action is also done to build sympathy for the opponent. This way, the perpetrator's mistakes are less obvious, and the perpetrator is also seen as a victim. As a result, the perpetrator will be less burdened with their mistakes.
- 6) Inviting Others to Participate in the Manipulation

Manipulators often invite others to facilitate their actions. The goal of this action is, of course, to make you more trusting, pressured, or silent. As a result, the perpetrator can easily get what they want. This will eventually lead to the victim not questioning the perpetrator's mistakes.

7) Silent Treatment

When involved in a conflict with a manipulative person, they prefer to use the silent treatment. This practice involves silence and ignoring the victim. Generally, the goal of the silent treatment is to create fear and guilt. This way, the perpetrator's mistakes will be forgotten.

Impact of manipulation on mental health

The impact of manipulation not only affects the victim's emotions but also their mental health. In severe cases, this practice can result in psychological trauma. Some of the impacts of manipulation on the victim's mental health include:

- 1) Depression,
- 2) Anxiety disorders,
- 3) Development of unhealthy coping mechanisms,
- 4) Prioritizing others' needs over their own,
- 5) Frequent lying about one's feelings, and
- 6) Difficulty trusting others.

These conditions are often not recognized by the victim because manipulation can occur subtly and gradually. Many people only realize its impact after feeling emotionally exhausted or losing self-confidence. In some cases, prolonged manipulation can trigger psychological trauma. This trauma can manifest as excessive fear, hypervigilance, or strong emotional reactions when faced with situations that remind them of the experience. Early treatment can help in understanding one's condition and prevent further impacts.

How to Deal with Manipulative People

Manipulation in a relationship must be stopped immediately. Otherwise, it can risk harming mental health. Therefore, careful recognition and identification of the characteristics of manipulation, as mentioned above, are crucial. Because this is the opposite of effective communication, countering manipulation can be done by exploiting factors that hinder the communication process. One crucial aspect of interpersonal communication is the physical environment in which communication occurs. Victims of manipulation may avoid quiet physical environments, making it difficult for the gaslighter to carry out their actions. Optimizing Communication for Victims of Manipulation: Victims of manipulation are often conditioned to find it difficult to express their feelings to others. Many victims are completely alienated from their environment, making it difficult for them to seek help.

Furthermore, manipulation is a repetitive act that, over time, will increasingly erode the victim's self-confidence. To overcome ongoing manipulation, victims need to be convinced to change the situation. Change cannot be expected from others, such as a gaslighter becoming "good," because the situation involves other people and is not easily controlled by the victim. However, victims of manipulation must strive to control their reactions to the gaslighter. They can try, or receive help, to open communication with others. The truth received from only one party (the gaslighter) can be reexamined with others. Furthermore, victims of manipulation must have the courage to share their situation with others they can trust. Of course, sometimes it's not easy to convince others that manipulation is real. This is especially true when the gaslighter is someone close to the victim, such as a partner or even a parent. To help convince others, victims of manipulation must have strong evidence, such as a recording of the gaslighter's speech. Once you've recognized and identified the signs of manipulation, there are several ways you can mitigate the emotional impact of the manipulation.

Here are some ways to deal with a manipulative person:

- 1) Express your opinion clearly, firmly, directly, and specifically. Apologize if you're wrong, but don't overdo it.
- 2) Don't dwell on what the manipulator says.
- 3) Avoid making hasty decisions.

- 4) Don't try to defeat the manipulator. Instead, find a way to gently let them know you understand they're manipulating you.
- 5) Avoid excessive interaction with the manipulator, especially if your relationship with them isn't personal.
- 6) Find someone you can trust, who isn't under the manipulator's influence, to talk to or ask for advice about the situation you're facing.

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