



Contexts of Communication through Manipulation

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Abstract

The presence of communication for everything that means human relations is indisputable. Even if through this tool with which the human being has been appropriated the relationships between individuals can be configured adequately, in the sense in which we can speak of positive connotations of communication, a less admirable side - the fruit of the human mind - fades from the favorable reputation of process.

The article approaches the problem of manipulation from multiple perspectives, trying to capture - in a comprehensive structure - the dimensions under which this phenomenon manifests itself in human communication: the peculiarities of language, persuasion-manipulation, manipulation as a procedural communication norm, and pathological manipulation.

Keywords: communication, manipulation, psychopath, pathological behavior

1. Introduction

Around 1800, the term handling meant performing an action such as moving, guiding, acting, carrying (directing) changing something with the hands (thus implying a material component). Later it expanded its meaning to mean the skillful management of a circumstance, in order to fulfill some personal goals (so, a conceptual orientation towards abstraction).

The concept has been widely theorized since 1980 when it was introduced by R. E. Goodin, who defined manipulation as "a deceptive and covert influence adopted by a speaker (a manipulator) to intentionally and directly affect the beliefs, desires, and /or one's emotions in ways that are usually not in one's self-interest, or at least not in one's self-interest in the present context." (Goodin, 1980, p. 59).

More or less accepted, the phenomenon of manipulation manifests itself from the earliest age, perfecting itself along with the evolution of the individual. Most likely the infant, who cries for no real reason (related to food, hygiene, comfort, etc.), but stops suddenly if picked up, vigorously picking up where he left off when feeling abandoned, has a base. The eventuality that the inclusion of an infant in the nefarious category of manipulators is ridiculous or unnatural can be invalidated by similar examples. Just because they aren't developed enough to rationalize their behavior when they have a "request" doesn't mean little ones don't know what they're doing. Human interaction has, somehow, in its content, firmly anchored, the component of manipulation. In other words, people are naturally manipulative.

The difference between acceptable (natural) and reprehensible manipulative behavior is given by:

- (i) The purpose pursued
- (ii) The means used
- (iii) The severity with which the manipulative person acts

Such elements give the true dimension of manipulative behavior. Even though there may be a tendency to believe or judge manipulation as a substitute for lying, concretely, the manipulative content oscillates between two poles: one side is based on truth, starting from things with real existence, and the other includes lying, to succeed in influencing the person.

If, by its nature, the lie cancels the truth, the manipulation "processes" it, giving it a new form (distorted by adding false elements), but perceived as real by the receiver's mind.

The success of the manipulative approach depends on a set of factors - first of all - cognitive, motivational, training, experience, and vocabulary elements, complemented by the use of an expressive, elaborate non-verbal register, the last component being of great importance. For the victim, it will be all the more difficult to resist manipulation, as the correct and timely processing of received information is more complicated by the manipulator's modus operandi.

Specifically, the manipulation happens when the receiver does not detect the hidden intentions of the sender, the latter masterfully succeeding in harmonizing the listed factors.

Dincolo de aspectele teoretice privind mecanismele de funcționare a manipulării, interesează modul în care acestea se concretizează în planul comunicării.

2. Language peculiarities of communication manipulation

A highly useful component for manipulation, language, through its lexematic diversity, allows the distorted presentation of contents. Depending on the desire of the speaker, who shapes his speech according to his hidden intentions, the objective reality can be presented vaguely, ambiguously, truncated, or selectively. It is the idea in which Danler (2005) observes the subjective nature of language, considering that anything can be transmitted, and expressed through it, including manipulative speech. On such a rational basis, manipulation is, in the author's view, an intrinsic part of "language in use". (2005, p. 63).

One of the basic characteristics of communication is *intentionality*, through which the ability of the human individual to elaborate and transmit contents and meanings, within his interactions, is highlighted.

Manipulation is a pragmatic phenomenon that achieves its goals without the obvious detection of communicative intent. Thus, the speaker knowingly chooses a form of utterance that does not draw attention, through any kind of direct indications, to his intentions. By increasing the level of inadequate perception of the information field, the manipulation widens the illusory subjective reality. In other words, as the speaker moves forward, cautiously, and attentively to the effect of the action he carries out, in the process of trapping the interlocutor in the trap of his words, the manipulation gains more and more force, the one who executes it becoming not only more and more confident, but also more innovative, creative.

From a semantic point of view, the term manipulation is structured on two essential dimensions, both specific to the addressee. The first dimension considers the intention, which is negative; the second (related to the first) is the transposition into the plane of communication of what has been mentally planned, the speaker trying to appear sincere, when in fact his action is to influence, covertly, the mind of the listener.

By using appropriate vocabulary and illustrative nonverbal behavior, the sender manages to capture the listener's full attention, and once this plan is worked out, the path to getting him to accept things as they are presented becomes easier to follow.

From the structural perspective of approach, as a rule, the content of the speech focuses either on the connection with the immediate reality (the speaker trying to find elements of correspondence with it, in his effort to convince the listener of the "truthfulness" of what is reported), or is oriented towards the future, or past, with an emphasis on the practical component, related to experience. This orientation of the discourse on the time axis is determined by the goal pursued by the speaker in the manipulative approach, by the stage in which the relationship with the manipulated person is found, by the way it resonates - from the point of view of interests - at one of the three temporal moments.

The appropriate linguistic features of manipulative speech are difficult to identify because they generally do not go beyond the usual framework of speech. Even so, certain linguistic dominants specific to manipulative discourse are, statistically, detectable, and the one who uses them aims to create dissonances in the mental state of the interlocutor. It should be noted that such linguistic dominants are not constituted, however, in a certain terminological structure, like a special verbal register proper (which can be consulted), but exert their influence at a pragmatic level, through the user. In other words, it is language that makes available to the speakers a whole arsenal of linguistic means to achieve manipulative goals.

In an immediate sense, linguistic manipulation involves the engagement of two interlocutors - the manipulator (the active part) and the manipulated person (the passive part) - in a dialogue, motivated by the intention of the first to progress toward the achievement of the proposed goal. In this sense, the sender initiates the interaction, adapting it to meet his needs to influence the receiver on a psycho-emotional and/or behavioral level.

As in the current communication, and the case of the one with manipulative purpose, the transmission of messages through direct verbal communication offers the speaker the advantage of non-verbal support in the transmission of meanings. In the written version of verbal communication, the privilege given by non-verbal elements disappears, the issuer *needing* to be much more attentive to the formulation of the contents, as the reader can return, reflecting on them in depth.

A distinctive feature of manipulative communication is the formulation of messages in an imprecise, insufficiently well-defined manner. This intentional, translatable linguistic ambiguity, according to Stalnaker (2002), is not only caused by the accidental use of confusing words, impenetrable statements, or the exaggerated use of metaphors but mostly by the creation of general vagueness. As such, those parts of the contents that may be understood by the receiver, against the background of the general confusion created, still pose problems of understanding and interpretation. (2002, p. 25).

How the human individual attaches meanings to words, depending on their own cognitive, perceptual, motivational, educational, temperamental, and socio-cultural particularities, is related to the manner of interpreting and assigning meanings to the reality in which they live. It is the point where Beard observes that "Language is a means of communication, a means of presenting and shaping the set of beliefs. Language is not somehow separate from the ideas it contains, but how it is used says a lot about how the ideas have been shaped." (2008, p. 18).

Syntax provides the language user with a variety of possibilities to communicate their messages. In its syntactic component, the verbal register of the language systematizes the meanings transmitted according to the intentions of the one who expresses them.

According to Gardner (2006), at the verbal level, manipulative speech is based on the use of a certain vocabulary, along with a series of paralinguistic elements consisting of specific vocal inflections, with the role of keeping the interlocutor under control (2006, p.48).

The skillful use, appropriately combining verbal and non-verbal elements in the elaboration of the transmitted messages, brings the manipulated person into the ideal zone for the manipulator, namely active listening. From here, the course of things acquires the coherence desired by the manipulative person: the receiver becomes more and more gullible, and his critical thinking is more and more diminished, which means, for the speaker, getting closer to the intended goal.

3. Persuasion Manipulation: terminological and content distinctions

Any reference to persuasion forces the consideration of a defining characteristic for the human being, namely consciousness, which objectifies the communication process, making it possible to influence the interlocutor. Therefore, the behavior, beliefs, and deeds of the human individual are shaped by communication, which is inseparable from the plane of consciousness. Furthermore, the consciousness-communication axis is completed by the decisional component, which determines the manner of action, assumedly. "Manipulation appeals to the cultural programming of the individual, to the basis of thought stereotypes, frames, and schemas, to what might be called a pre-coding of the individual."... "The cause-effect reaction, the statistical necessity, arising in manipulation due to accessing the programming of the human being through education, shows us that the manipulative subject goes beyond the field of consciousness of the manipulated one, that he treats him as an object. This is the main flaw of manipulation: the abandonment of persuasion leads to a transformation of the relationship between two subjects into a subject-object relationship. The difference is that in manipulation there is no need for a hierarchy that confers superiority on the speaker, the manipulator over the receiver as persuasion. Again, as distinct from persuasion and seduction, manipulation cannot be confessed, as this would bring the subject's action from the programming level to the conscious level. Manipulation is a technique because it

causes behaviors using programming language procedures, just like in computer programming. Manipulation uses speech as a simple action." (Codoban, 2006, p.154).

Basically, persuasion involves: (i) changing the set of beliefs, behaviors, facts through communication; (ii) decision-making influence; (iii) the presence of consciousness which, in the context of persuasion, signifies the freedom to make choices.

Persuasion acts as the "honest" version of manipulation, in other words, persuasion could be considered a form of sub-manipulation, i.e. influence.

The term *influence* has no predefined semantic content in either a positive or negative sense, in other words, separated from the context, it indicates neutrality.

Like persuasion, influence – as an action – is based on freedom of choice. A person who tries to influence someone to do a certain thing is aware from the beginning that his endeavor may or may not be successful, the subject having the possibility of choice. Therefore, in influence the coercive factor is non-existent, the subject desired to be influenced cannot be compelled to act according to the intentions of the interested party.

Persuasion, like influence, does not have the negative connotation of manipulation. It is generally considered a positive thing when one can construct a "persuasive argument".

A more precise differentiation between manipulation and persuasion cannot exclude the ethical component, which underpins persuasion. Defined in the simplest terms, the act of persuading is, according to DEX, the *Action, gift, or power of persuading someone to believe, think, or do a certain thing*. The ethical perspective of approaching persuasion divides theorists, from Aristotle to the present day, into two categories. The first is of those who consider persuasion to fall within the area of impartiality, for example, James McCroskey (1972, p.269), i.e. it presents neither positive nor negative attributes, respectively the category of those who label it as favorable to interpersonal relations. Adherent to the latter perspective, Aristotle assigns persuasion an important place among how truth can be reached, arguing that it is correct and noble. Such an approach is explained by the fact that the persuasive process involves convincing the person about a certain thing (action, thought, etc.), not through hidden ways (such as manipulation), but through the transparent presentation of arguments, offering the person the possibility to choose whether or not to accept the proposed change. Far from being simple to achieve, succeeding in persuasion means preparing and putting into proper context the reasons based on which the proposed change is welcome, discursive harmonization with the interlocutor (in the sense of not imposing but suggesting freedom of choice), but also the ability to identify the emotional state that is favorable to the presentation of arguments.

Even if, at the level of theory, persuasion is approached separately, in fact, it is integrated into the communication process. In principle, the human communication flow is naturally connected to the fulfillment of the different goals that the communicators have, and which can be more or less articulated, or of different significance. However, whatever its form or intensity, persuasion is intrinsic to the communication process, the foundation of human interaction. An important component of the professional area, persuasive behavior, necessary in several important areas of social life, led Dr. Herbert W. Simons, a professor at Temple University, to state that "The so-called professions of people active in fields such as politics, law, social work, counseling, business management, advertising, sales, public relations, ministerial might as well be called professions of persuasion." (1986, p. 4).

Normally, persuasion acts and should be seen as an agent of change, thus having positive valences. The human individual is the one who can determine the limits to which this can be pushed. Exceeding certain levels, translated by deviations from responsible, civic, and moral conduct, causes persuasion to acquire specific accents of manipulation, which sends it directly into the obscure area of human behavior. Manipulation can be described as the perverse version of persuasion. In the realm of real life, accurately demarcating the boundary between the two modalities operating through communication becomes a challenge in itself.

A first factor conditioning the distinction between manipulation and persuasion would be the conscious inner drive. When this dictates to the individual the initiation of an action contrary to the wishes and interests of the person to whom the said action is addressed, one can speak of manipulation. As the human being is - in current times more than ever - in a perpetual need to satisfy "needs", including in self-willed ways, the phenomenon of manipulation is not exactly an isolated one. The second illustrative element for the persuasion-manipulation distinction refers to extracting the element of truth from content, also knowingly. The most exemplary pose of this type is illustrated by the advertising area, where the potential buyer is assaulted with exaggerated (audio-visual) arguments regarding the exceptional qualities of a product. It is more of an aggressive approach, with the buyer experiencing not only the disappointment of the lack of promised product quality but also the frustration of having to pay for that disappointment, allowing themselves to be manipulated. Political campaigns are also edifying, in which candidates compete in promises presented as convincingly as possible, which, once elected, they forget.

In essence, it can be said that the defining aspect of manipulation is the element of force, by which to nullify people's possibility of choice. While persuasion is limited to the idea of influence, manipulation can be imperative, blocking any attempt by the manipulated subject to get out of the manipulator's sphere of action.

4. Manipulation, as a form of relational normality

The attempt to find the explanatory sources of the manipulative behavior, which does not fit into the pathological area, leads to the idea of not considering that it is exclusively malicious, regardless of the context.

This type of behavior can have causes related to the structure and personality type of the insecure, vulnerable individual, unable to communicate his needs directly to others. The absence of healthy, optimal strategies for dealing with interpersonal relationships, unfortunately, fuels people with predominantly manipulative behavior.

The low level of effective communication skills leads to the installation of an avoidant attitude, the person preferring isolation, to be able to focus on the development of undisclosed action strategies, through which they can achieve their goals. Among the causes responsible for communication disability can be listed the life experiences in which the person was either prevented from expressing his feelings, dissatisfactions, or frustrations, was punished for expressing them, or lived in an environment where communication did not was encouraged. Such situations, in which one of the basic needs of the human being, namely, interaction through communication, is blocked, have the reverse side of installing insecurity, of the tendency to avoid social contact, in short, the constant fear of not making a mistake,

which is equivalent to discrediting the person. The consequences are manifested in two directions, namely, the preference for indirect communication, and not taking responsibility for one's actions.

Equally, the feeling of insecurity and the fear of being abandoned (in the case of love relationships) are favorable factors for manipulative behavior. Another reason why people become manipulative is related to the fear of not being incriminated, or subject to individual or collective opprobrium, as a result of an act that violates the norms of coexistence.

The series of factors that motivate the act of manipulation is extremely extensive, but perhaps it is relevant enough to mention that, as cynical as it may seem, there are people who resort to it for purely recreational purposes. For the category of people in question, manipulation is a form of disconnection from the dull reality in which they believe they live, in which nothing new, challenging, or interesting happens.

On a social level, manipulation is a psychological phenomenon whose destructive effects are not limited to the individual level, but have an impact on society as a whole.

The perspective proposed by Van Dijk (2006) builds on the fact that the substance of manipulation, as a form of interaction and communication, consists in exercising control over the interlocutor (individual or wider audience), most often, against their will or interests. This would be the rational basis for which, at the level of collective conception, the phenomenon has unfavorable connotations. Specifically, manipulation disregards social norms, therefore it is not a good thing (2006, p.360).

In the volume *Techniques of Manipulation*, Bogdan Ficeac (1998) describes manipulation as a phenomenon of dehumanization that is not rare, worrying, and very widespread. "In terms of social psychology, we can talk about manipulation when a certain social situation is created premeditated to influence the reactions and behavior of the manipulated in the sense desired by the manipulator" (Ficeac, 1998, p 30). The author classifies the manipulations in the following categories: (a) small manipulations, obtained through minor changes in the social situation; (b) medium manipulations, which refer to important changes in social situations; (c) large manipulations, represented by the influence of an individual's entire culture.

The manipulator manages to build his mask of normality by copying the emotions and imitating the behavior of the victim, although, for him, its principles mean nothing.

The manipulative individual acts through various tricks, often lying by omission. This type of strategy tries to prove its usefulness, especially if his/her true intentions are discovered. The ability to turn a situation, in which they have failed, in their favor, is also remarkable, in the sense that they manage to induce the victim to believe that she bears the entire blame for that failure, just because she asked a question, or brought the topic under discussion. Additionally, to strengthen his authoritarian point of view, the manipulator marches on disregard, addressing accusatory messages, to the point where he turns the victim into the person who abuses him, trying to destabilize him. That is, exactly what he does is attributed to the other, the whole process being put in terms of cause and effect: the victim's words or actions determined his behavior.

A strategy with good results for the manipulative individual consists of using answers built evasively, and indecisively, and avoiding commitments, promises, and assumptions. In this way, a flexible framework is created, which can be adapted to the circumstances, depending on the goals pursued and by personal affirmations.

Worthy of note is the acumen to select the perfect victim who fits a certain pattern to which the manipulative person is attracted. A pattern that must not lack low self-esteem, vulnerability, the feeling of loneliness, social anxiety, and psycho-behavioral peculiarities that the future victim masks as best he can for the public eye, but which are perfectly detectable by the manipulator.

5. Pathological manipulation

As a form of manifestation within the pathological zone, manipulative behavior can be found in the clinical picture of various personality disorders: antisocial, psychopathic, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic.

Although the purposes for which they manipulate are diverse, for most, the exploitation of the affective plane, the emotional enslavement represents the true source of fulfillment.

Robert D. Hare believes that although pathological manipulators lack the qualities necessary for a lover or husband, they manage to lure many partners into their traps. Having no other avenue of social interaction, and nothing to offer in a relationship (feelings of affection, unconditional love, trust), they resort to love siege as bait to make their victims completely captive (1998). The use of a linguistic and behavioral arsenal that includes compliments, declarations of love, romantic encounters, and gestures of tenderness (even if forced) attracts and binds the victim, but the process is not reciprocal. After seducing the victim, he is prevented, at first subtly, then imperatively, from making decisions according to his values and limits, eventually ending up doing things he would otherwise not do to care for him. The manipulator causes the victim to place their sense of self-worth and emotional well-being in his hands, to then, through psychological influence, slowly but surely destroy their identity and mental health. For pathological manipulators, only having control matters, and to be successful in this direction, they do their best to find out the vulnerabilities, the weaknesses of the target person, speculated with a subtlety that they not only do not perceive but may think is normal. Things go to the point where the victim comes to believe that the blame for everything that happens to him belongs exclusively to him. The manipulator senses that to win the victim's trust, he must make use of the person's doubts and emotions. In this sense, having control of the information, he isolates it as much as possible, annihilating any possibility of access to alternative sources of information, or form of support.

Although it cannot be considered a rule, women most often fall prey to the erotic and emotional manipulation of psychopaths.

Sandra L. Brown (2009) states that psychopaths choose educated, independent, and accomplished women as partners. The ultimate challenge for the psychopath is to identify an intelligent, high-potential, powerful woman so that he can control her as he pleases, turning her into a puppet. "To a degree, this is, for a psychopath, the ultimate power play in which he captures someone powerful and puts them on the floor emotionally. It is the fullness of psychological triumph for a psychopath" (2009, p 229).

Although, on the surface, dominating weak, easily influenced individuals is much easier to achieve, psychopaths like power games. The more docile and passive the victim, the more the psychopath will lose interest, looking for tenacious, hard-to-win individuals to engage in his power games. He chameleonicly transforms his interests and personality traits according to the specifics of the target he aims to seduce and, implicitly, use. One point where the pathological manipulator excels is caution in the initial stage of the relationship. Under the

guise of a genuine interest in the victim's existential aspects (related to the past, present, relationships, frustrations, shortcomings, etc.), he accumulates information, in this way, on the one hand, being able to observe all his actions, and in the long run, to be able to emotionally blackmail her.

By imitating emotions and behaviors, the person succeeds, through his manipulation ability, in creating the impression for the victim that his entire conduct is for the ultimate good of the latter, impeccably masking personal interests from extreme selfishness. In this way, the impression of maximum compatibility with the partner can be conveyed. The process of pathological seduction is carried out according to a plan and includes three steps: idealization, devaluation, and abandonment. In the book *Legături periculoase* (Dangerous Liaisons), Claudia Moscovici (2017) provides an extensive description of the seduction process stating that "every step becomes logical once you understand the psychological profile of a psychopath, of (in)human beings who live for the pleasure of controlling and hurting them others. 1) Idealization: not you, but everything he wanted from you and only for as long as he wanted it; 2) Devaluation: once it has caught you in its nets, boredom sets in and you lose interest; 3) Abandonment: after he got everything he wanted from you and procured other victims" (Moscovici, 2017, p 163).

The reasons that keep the victim captive in the toxic relationship, and how she manages to resist are aspects that have aroused the interest of different authors (Sandra L Brown, 2009, Claudia Moscovici, 2017; Martha Stout, 2005; Robert Cialdini, 2019) who highlighted the mechanisms of adaptation by which the victims imagine that they are those "special people" who through love, obedience and understanding will cause the psychopath to love them. These mechanisms are: *denial* – the most common form of defense against an uncomfortable/unpleasant reality; *isolation* – the victim remains without access to outside opinions, which could provide a realistic point of view on the situation in which he is; *superiority complex/narcissistic tendencies* – the person in question feels superior to other victims of the psychopath, believing that loyalty to him reflects the moral and social qualities that the "exploiter" values; *ambivalence* – how people adapt to psychological manipulation.

In short, the behavior of pathological manipulators is characterized by: (i) seduction as a power play, (ii) embellishment of the erotic experience as a substitute for genuine emotional connection, (iii) evaluation of the victim, (iv) the personalized mask of the psychopath (adaptation manipulation technique to the victim's personality and to test the power of control over it), (v) possessiveness (which women consider a form of love), (vi) lack of remorse for the harm caused to others, (vii) pathological manipulation (the more the victim gives in, the more the appetite for control increases immeasurably), (viii) fleeting connections with other people (the psychopath enjoys creating rivalry and jealousy between women), (ix) lying, (x) emotional emptiness, (xi) rage of the psychopath (appears when the victim no longer shows interest in him, disregarding him) and (xii) the phase of devaluation and abandonment.

6. Conclusions

1. Like any area of social life, that cannot function without communication, in the case of manipulation, language is the main vehicle that fuels it.
2. Whatever acceptance persuasion enjoys, it would be wrong excluding it from the area of manipulation, its role being absolutely important in this sense.
3. By using specific strategies, the manipulation aims to affect the system of beliefs, and convictions, along with the psycho-emotional and behavioral plans of the people, the action contrary to their interests.
4. In the pathological sphere, it can be said that the manipulation acts in its paroxysmal form, with the victim usually reaching a state of deep identity destabilization, the consequences of which can be irreversible.

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