Being manipulated in the group of friends - predisposition and psychological implications

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Abstract

This paper states that manipulation is more effective when relations between members are based on trust and when they are emotionally involved. Based on the main hypotheses and objectives of the study, we try to emphasize the implications of manipulation in friendship relations, as well as its various influences on the self-image of young people. As the results pointed out, in a group of friends, the higher the interpersonal dependence, the more prone people will be to being manipulated; moreover, empathy and exaggerated emotional trust may lead to manipulation 'victims'.

1. Introduction

Friendship relationships are extremely important for human existence, and they seem to play a very important role for teenagers and young people. The group of friends is what represents them, what they identify with, and sometimes it happens that their opinion is more important than that of their parents.

Despite all of this, the present study attempts to discuss manipulation within the group of friends. Since we live in a world governed by aggression, competition, conflict and manipulation, it may be very possible for any group of friends, however stable and well-formed, to be the target of such phenomena. Moreover, the group of friends tends to influence all aspects of an individual’s life (McNamara Barry,
Wentzel, 2006), from his evolution to his self-image. One builds his self-image by comparing himself with the others, especially family and friends.

Given these premises, we attempted to see whether manipulation within friendships has any implications and effects on the self-image of young people. Manipulation tends to be a virtue, especially when we impose ourselves in an extremely competitive social environment and become effective. And since competition between social individuals has become stronger, more and more people resort to manipulation making use of the ‘weaknesses’ of those around them, in order to attain their own purposes. Some of them become masters of persuasion or manipulation of any kind.

We must point out that people have different ways to respond in certain situations (for example attitudes of avoiding some situations, manipulative, aggressive or constructive attitudes) individualize us and provides us success.

Some people think the manipulation phenomenon is a very important issue in Psychology. We can study manipulation techniques, how to use them more effectively, and also how to unravel manipulation and fight it.

Starting from these observations we concluded that the implications which manipulation can have within friendship relations over the self-image of young people, would be an interesting research topic. We took the following starting points: empathy among people and especially among friends, emotional trust in other persons and self image. Through manipulation, one can use any of the above-mentioned aspects within a group of friends in order to determine someone to act in a certain way and attain specific purposes. We shouldn’t ignore that people have specific ways of responding to situations (such as avoiding attitudes, manipulating attitudes, aggressive or constructive attitudes). These are specific to our individuality and at the same time, can lead us to the most wanted success.

One of the difficulties we had during our research was that there were few young people willing to admit that they do use manipulation in order to have control over certain situations or to attain particular goals. Also, they wouldn’t admit that they make use and take advantage of their friends’ weaknesses. Moreover, manipulation is hard to quantify, although many consider that it occurs in almost all aspects of social life.

2. Objectives of the study

Stating the hypotheses and the theoretical-explicative objectives is needed in order to complete the data regarding the presence of manipulation and persuasion in the group of friends, and their implications in the young people’s self-image.

The objectives of the study are: a. to identify the implications of manipulation within the group of friends; b. to emphasise the correlation between interpersonal dependence of group members and predisposition of being manipulated; c. to establish a correlation between young people’s self-image and their response attitudes in difficult or critical situations.

3. Hypotheses

The more empathically people manifest with those around them, the more inclined they are to being manipulated; b. High interpersonal dependence is directly connected to the predisposition of being manipulated; c. Exaggerated self-image is directly connected to the predisposition of being manipulated.
4. Method

4.1. Selection and structure of the group

The researched group was selected from young people aged 20 to 25 (students from different faculties, but also fresh graduates, active participants in their professional field). The group was selected based on the following criteria: friendship duration (at least 12 months); an active and stable group of friends, with a common history and current activities being held (group of at least 3 persons); the selection of the participants was made after asked whether their present group of friends was the one they wanted to be in.

During the first stage of group selection, we screened 120 persons, out of which 100 were selected. This group was composed of 38 males and 62 females. People involved in the study were not necessarily connected to one another by friendship. The age distribution was: 10 subjects of 20 years old, 10 subjects of 21 years old, 20 subjects of 22 years old, 20 subjects of 23 years old, 15 subjects of 24 years old, and 25 subjects of 25 years old.

The research process had the following work stages: establishing the factors which correlate with the manipulating attitude within the group of friends (interpersonal dependence, degree of empathy, self-image) and establishing the tools to adequately investigate them; applying the scales and the questionnaires to the whole group; deciphering and working on primary data; establishing the system to identify the influence of manipulation on the self-image of young people based on correlated criteria (empathy, interpersonal dependence, exaggerated self-image) within the group of subjects; statistical procedures; analysis and interpretation of correlated data. After establishing the instruments and the involved variables, (the passive and manipulative attitude, empathy, interpersonal dependence, self-image), we applied the instruments to the entire group of subjects. Instruments were applied to young people aged 20 to 25. They were asked to answer as honest as possible, and confidentiality of the answers was ensured. Most of the subjects were not reluctant at all and showed high interest in finding out the results of the research.

4.2. Research tools

In order to accomplish the present study, we used EIS scale, interpersonal dependence scale and emotional intelligence scale, plus the acknowledging of the four reacting ways especially in difficult or critical situations questionnaires, considering that these research tools are enough to attain our objectives.

We present below, in a simplified manner, the instruments we used: Ego Identity Scale (EIS) - This scale was realized by Tan, Kendis, Fine, Porac (1977). It measures the degree of Ego formation and maturity, being based on Erickson’s concept of “Ego identity”.

Interpersonal dependence measurement scale. This scale was created by Hirschfeld et al. (1977), and it measures the degree of interpersonal dependence, and it is divided in three sub-scales (Scale of emotional trust in other persons; Scale of lack of social self-confidence; Scale of affirmation of autonomy on a social level); Emotional intelligence test (QE) - The emotional intelligence test is to be found in two versions: one for young people and adults, and one for children. This test was adapted by Roco, M. (2001) after Bar-On and Goleman. The 10 items of the test consist of presenting several situations (scenarios) in which a person can take part. The test completion is, on the one hand, about making the individual place himself in the situation, and on the other hand, about choosing one out of four response possibilities, which present some concrete manners of reacting in the situations that we mentioned; Acknowledging of the four manners of reaction, especially in difficult or critical situations questionnaire - This questionnaire was created by Chalvin and adapted by Roco (2001) and it measures...
the way in which an individual reacts to critical and difficult situations and the tendency to adopt one of the four types of attitudes: flight, fight, manipulation and assertion. Every question of the questionnaire corresponds to one of the four types of attitudes mentioned above.

5. Results

According to the results and the hypotheses, we got to the following conclusions:

1. The more empathetic people are with those around them, the more predisposed they are to manipulation. In order to make a connection, we used the emotional intelligence test scores and those from the questionnaire regarding the four ways of reaction. We stated that the higher the QE (emotional intelligence) is, the more predisposed to be manipulated the individuals are. The predisposition to be manipulated implies that an individual obtains a lower score in manipulation attitude and a higher score in passive attitude. Scores in emotional intelligence test ranged from 45 to 150 (scores below 100 point out an under average QE, scores from 100 to 150 point out to an average QE). We used this test because when we are speaking of emotional intelligence, we also refer to empathy. In order to show the correlation between these variables, we considered that it was necessary to compute the linear Pearson correlation quotient. The statistical analysis showed that there is a significant negative correlation (r=-0.77, p<0.01, bilateral) between the QE quotient and the manipulation attitude score. This means that the higher the QE is, the lower the manipulation attitude score will be. Moreover, there is a significant positive correlation (r=0.74, p<0.01, bilateral) between scores in emotional intelligence and passive attitude. We can thus conclude that the hypothesis was confirmed.

2. High interpersonal dependence correlates directly with the predisposition to be manipulated. Interpersonal dependence implies emotional trust in other persons, lack of self-confidence, and affirmation on a social level. In order to see how the interpersonal dependence score correlates with the predisposition to be manipulated, (the score obtained in manipulation attitude and in passive attitude), we computed the Pearson correlation quotient. A significant negative correlation emerged (r=-0.80, p<0.01, bilateral) between the emotional dependence scores and the manipulation attitudes scores. We can thus conclude: the higher the score of interpersonal dependence is, the more predisposed people are to be manipulated. This hypothesis is confirmed as well.

3. Exaggerated self-image correlates directly with the predisposition to be manipulated. We stated that an exaggerated self-image increases the predisposition to be manipulated. After the statistical procedures, a significant positive correlation emerged, (r=0.59, p<0.01, bilateral) between the EIS score regarding the self-image and the passive attitude. Thus, we considered that choosing a passive response manner in situations can increase the predisposition to be manipulated.

6. Discussions

One of our objectives was to correlate interpersonal dependence on group members and the predisposition to be manipulated. After the statistical analysis, a negative correlation resulted, meaning that the predisposition for manipulation is higher when we are more dependent on other persons. Increased emotional trust in other persons may be regarded as a “weakness” one can take advantage of, especially when one uses manipulation to attain goals. If the manipulating person is invested with too much trust, then he or she can take advantage of it.

High interpersonal dependence correlates with a passive attitude to social situations, as well. It is possible that this passive attitude makes people be more predisposed for manipulation. A dependent
person will obey the rules of the majority within the group. This possibility also exists in the group of friends, the individual being afraid of isolation or eventually exclusion.

Another objective of the study was to emphasize the correlation between the self-image of young people and response attitudes in difficult or critical situations. According to the statistical analysis, it resulted that an exaggerated self-image increases the predisposition for being manipulated. People with an exaggerated self-image have an over-shaped self-identity, they overrate themselves and they are overconfident. A manipulative person will use these aspects in order to obtain strong effects. Major changes within an individual’s personality can occur, from his social autonomy to the way he sees himself and the reality.

Empathy (as part of emotional intelligence) implies true interest in other’s concerns. This interest may be used by manipulative persons as a tool in attaining a goal. Many people are more open and intimate in a group of friends. This could determine someone to use manipulation for friends and those closer to us are easier to convince to adopt certain ideas, options, or even to help attain some goals that otherwise seem rather unimportant to them. It is the emotional charge of relations that leads to applying manipulating mechanism.

One of the hypotheses stated that the more empathetic people are to those around them, the more predisposed they are to be manipulated. We considered that empathy is one of the most common phenomenon among a group of friends, as it is seen, most of the time, as a supportive and understanding environment.

Another objective of this research was to identify the implications of manipulation and persuasion in the relations with the group of friends. During young age, the group offers support, trust and understanding. Young people aged 20 to 25 establish their priorities, and try to build a social and professional status. Thus, friends are those who will play a highly important role in supporting these processes in reality. The process of becoming oneself continues during this time, and it goes without saying that obstacles may appear. These very obstacles can lead to the occurrence of manipulation, as an easy solution. We can observe that the group of friends represents a good environment for proving the efficiency of manipulation, given that it is highly emotionally charge; one can be easily manipulated once you have gained his affection and trust.

Our hypotheses have shown that empathy and exaggerated emotional trust can set the ground for a perfect manipulation.

References


