

Malignant manipulation at work: a qualitative exploration of strategies and tactics

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on the subtle tactics of malignant manipulators at work, persons who attempt to make others feel good but who in the background display manipulative behaviour towards those others and/or their associates, irrespective of potentially negative implications for their target. Building on previous research into the dark side of organizational and working life, we used qualitative in-depth information obtained from the targets of malignant manipulators in order to advance existing knowledge. In the course of our research, we identified a number of new tactics, yielding concrete and in-depth information on tactics that in the past had often been abstractly defined, and suggesting a procedural view of the phenomenon which can then both inform further theoretical and/or empirical research and also be used by practitioners to establish organizational policies for tackling the problem of malignant manipulation.

Keywords: dark side, manipulation, ingratiation, Machiavellianism, organizational (mis)behaviour

1. INTRODUCTION

Inspired by research on corporate bullies (James, 2012; R. Sutton, 2004; R. I. Sutton, 2007) and corporate psychopaths (Paul Babiak & Robert D. Hare, 2006), this study employs a grounded theory approach to explore a phenomenon which we label 'malignant manipulation', in which a manipulator seeks to make another person feel good while in the background displaying manipulative behaviour towards that person in order to further self-interest, irrespective of potentially negative implications for the target and/or for the organization.

This type of behaviour is described in several academic discourses, ranging from the dark triad – Narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy – in leadership (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2013) to misbehaviour in organizations (Rosignano, Hodson, & Lopez, 2009), (micro)politics and influencing activities in organizations (D. Kipnis, S. M. Schmidt, & I. Wilkinson, 1980; Neuberger, 2006; Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990), toxic workplaces (Frost, 2003; Steven & David, 2007), and bullying at work (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; S. Einarsen, 1999; Staale Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Salin, 2003; Zapf, 1999).

While many investigators have developed lists of potentially unethical and harmful activities at the workplace, the present study seeks to understand the processes of malignant manipulation, using a qualitative, phenomenological approach. More specifically, we explore the strategies and tactics used by the manipulators vis-à-vis their targets, as well as the dynamics of manipulation.

The first part of the paper reviews the literature with respect to manipulative strategies and tactics, and develops an analytical framework to identify, describe and analyse manipulative

behaviour in the workplace. Drawing on qualitative data, the subsequent empirical part analyses the reports of targets of, and witnesses to, malignant manipulation. The final two sections discuss these findings and draw conclusions from them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Interpersonal Manipulation

Interpersonal manipulation is an *“attempt to get someone to do or omit doing something [e.g., act, feel, or think] that he might not otherwise do or omit to do”* (Rudinow, 1978, p. 339). Everyone is capable of interpersonal manipulation that is not necessarily harmful to others, for example when ‘hunting’ for a job or a partner, by means of impression or image management (Erving Goffman, 1959). It is well documented that manipulation is ubiquitous, a fixed constituent of organizational power and politics (e.g., Blickle, 2003a; Buchanan & Badham, 2006; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Jackall, 1988; Neuberger, 2006). However, Seabright and Moberg (1998, p. 167) characterize manipulation as ethically controversial since it *“operates by robbing the victim of autonomy”*. Thus, manipulation – together with bullying, harassment, and discrimination – shares the normative assessment of being potentially a form of ‘unethical behaviour’ with negative consequences both for the target and for the organization.

This article deals with a specific type of interpersonal manipulation in working life: *“attempts to influence the attitudes, emotions and/or behaviour of others for the manipulator’s personal advantage, against the other’s self-interest, and potentially harmful to the other”* (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996, p. 285). ‘Personal advantage’ refers to the potentially positive outcomes for the manipulator, such as excitement, fortune, glory, power, status, and self-protection. ‘Against the other’s self-interest’ means that the manipulator either does not care about potentially negative consequences for the target or even has the intention of harming the target, by bringing about negative emotions, negative health consequences, negative performance implications and/or dismissal. Moreover, the manipulator’s influence might be such that the target expresses negative behaviour towards others.

Although our research focusses on the (observable) behaviour of the manipulators, we cannot ignore the potential relevance of personality as a driver of human behaviour. Manipulation of targets in the furtherance of self-interest is frequently mentioned in the analysis of personality configurations associated with Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). In line with Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare (2006), we assume that targets of manipulative behaviour might be exposed to such personalities, and thus it is relevant to distinguish between the different configurations of the ‘dark triad’ of personality.

Machiavellians possess a lack of empathy (Barnett & Thompson 1985), social interest, and prosocial behaviour (McHoskey, 1999). They express four assumptions: that it is wise to tell people what they want to hear (flattery), that people are dishonest (deceit), that people are immoral (immorality), and that people are vicious and untrustworthy (cynicism) (Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982). Whereas narcissists show a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, lack of

empathy, and hypersensitivity to the evaluation of others, psychopaths have a lack of conscience, empathy, guilt, or loyalty to others (Paul Babiak & Robert D. Hare, 2006; Hare, 1991). In this article, however, we leave aside the ‘personality configuration’ of the manipulator. Instead, we focus on the strategies and tactics they can use.

2.2. Manipulation Strategies and Tactics

For present purposes, ‘strategy’ involves a long-term orientation and overall plan for using resources to reach an ultimate goal in the face of an uncertain environment, while ‘tactics’ concern the concrete manoeuvres and attempts – the short-term-oriented operational actions and activities – for achieving these goals. A particular strategy may involve an assortment of tactics.

Various areas of management research have expanded our knowledge of the manipulation. To start with, impression management (E. Goffman, 1959; Stapleton & Hargie, 2011) - also known as strategic self-presentation in social interactions (Schuetz, 1998) - can be defined as a “conscious or unconscious attempt to control the images that are projected in social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6), involving the manipulation of another person’s perception. Further contributions to the analysis of manipulative behaviour in organizations can be found in the literature on (micro)political behaviour (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Neuberger, 2006) and power tactics (D. Kipnis, S. Schmidt, & I. Wilkinson, 1980; Kipnis & Vanderveer, 1971; Malhotra & Gino, 2011).

2.2.1. Manipulation strategies

Based on the initial work of authors such as E.E. Jones and T.S. Pittman (1982), Schneider (1981), Tedeschi (1981) and J. T. Tedeschi and V. Melburg (1984), complementary taxonomies concerning self-presentation styles have been developed. The following section integrates Schütz’s (1998) distinction between assertive, offensive, protective, and defensive styles – which we re-label as strategies – with Friedlander and Schwartz’s (1985) analysis of ingratiation, self-promotion, supplication, intimidation, and facework strategies.

The assertive strategy refers to active but not aggressive ways of establishing a desired impression: the manipulator tries to evoke interpersonal attraction, trust and/or a notion of competence, or makes the other person feel important, liked or needed. Ingratiation, self-promotion, supplication, and exemplification are assertive tactics. The aim of ingratiation is to evoke attributions of attractiveness. The aim of self-promotion is to convince the other of one’s expertise and leadership (qualities). By using the supplication tactic one seeks to create an impression of neediness, to arouse feelings of nurturance, obligation, and protection. The aim of the exemplification tactic is to appear morally worthy.

The offensive strategy concerns an active and aggressive way of establishing a desired impression: trying to look good by attacking others or convincing the target that one is powerful in a dangerous way and should be feared. The *protective strategy* is an avoidance strategy: for example, avoiding blame, disapproval, questions or insight into one’s ideas and goals. With a

defensive strategy (or facework tactic) one aims to place oneself or the (negative) event in a different light by fighting negative typifications.

2.2.2. Manipulation tactics

To get what they want, manipulators can use several tactics, some of which can be attributed to one or several of the abovementioned strategies. *Blaming others for things that go wrong, lying, non-verbal tactics, upward appeals, and coalitions* can serve several goals. Babiak and Hare (2006, p. 52) assume that “*pointing the finger at others serves the dual purposes of protecting the manipulator’s own image (defensive) while spreading disparaging information about rivals and detractors*” (*offensive*). They also argue that individuals who use this tactic might want to be perceived as helping or protecting the target from harm (i.e. exemplification, where the tactic is moral enhancement).

By telling *lies* - ‘information management’ - (Fandt & Ferris, 1990), manipulators may want to foster a positive impression (i.e., assertive), intimidate or blame individuals (*offensive*) and/or want to protect or repair their image (*defensive*). Braginsky (1970) distinguishes between lies of commission (*giving false information and distortion of true information*) and lies of omission (*withholding information*). Feigning concern and integrity are examples of lies of commission (Blake & Mouton, 1985; Falbo, 1977), as is dishonesty in trying to make others feel good.

Non-verbal tactics are a constitutive element of manipulation. Manipulators might use nodding affirmatively, smiling, making eye-contact with (Schlenker, 1980; Schneider, 1981) or hugging others (see introduction) to portray a likeable image (*assertive*). In contrast, they may roll their eyes or stare to show disapproval of what the target does or says (*offensive*). According to Schütz (1998), ‘showing strength’ (*power display*), for example through modifications of one’s physical appearance such as dress or body language (Schneider, 1981), is the positive sibling of intimidation. It is an assertive self-promotion tactic.

D. Kipnis et al. (1980) mention *upward appeals* and *coalitions*. ‘Upward appeals’ refer to appealing to higher levels or obtaining the informal support of superiors; ‘coalitions’ refer to the mobilization of colleagues or subordinates. We assume that both tactics can serve various goals: one might refer to superiors and/or colleagues to defend oneself, to intimidate or to present an attractive or competent image based on group membership.

Several authors elaborate on *aggressive* or *offensive tactics*, which are well-known from research on psychological violence at work (i.e. bullying, harassment, and discrimination). These include yelling, threatening, insistence, offending, playing on a supposed weakness, social exclusion, (threats of) sanctions, false accusations of bad performance, ridiculing, guilt induction, volatility, hostility, taking away privileges, diminishing position and job quality, and enhancing pressure due to increased and/or changing demands (Buss, Gomes, Higgins, & Lauterbach, 1987; S. Einarsen, 1999; Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; E.E. Jones & T.S. Pittman, 1982; David Kipnis et al., 1980; Rudinow, 1978; Schütz, 1998; Zapf, 1999). Schütz (1998) adds five further tactics: 1) downward comparison (i.e. achieving a more positive evaluation by making others with whom one is compared look less positive), 2) ironic statements or critical evaluation of a third party, 3) criticizing the questioner, 4) attacking the source of criticism, and 5) determining the topic of discussion.

The aim of *protective tactics* is ‘passive avoidance’; for example, avoiding blame, disapproval, questions or insight into one’s ideas and goals. Schütz (1998) distinguishes several tactics that are subservient to a protective strategy: avoiding public attention, minimal self-disclosure - saying as little as possible, or cautious self-description - avoiding the risks of positive self-presentation, also known as ‘acting humble’ (Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; D. Kipnis et al., 1980), minimizing social interaction, remaining silent, and passive but friendly interaction. Falbo’s (1977) evasion tactic (doing what one wants by avoiding the person who would disapprove) can also be seen as protective.

With *defensive tactics* (or facework) one wants to place oneself or the (negative) event in a different light by fighting negative typifications. Defenders reframe (i.e. accept responsibility for a negative outcome but either suggest that it is not so bad as it seems or argue it should not be seen in a negative way), apologize (i.e. accept responsibility for a negative outcome or behaviour, along with conceding that certain actions were unacceptable and should be punished), attribute responsibility (i.e. acknowledge that a certain negative event occurred but insist that one has not caused it; also known as disclaimers, excuses, self-handicapping, dissociation, and denial of responsibility), deny (by claiming that “*it did not happen*”) and/or justify by accepting that they caused a negative event but claim that it was inevitable and they should not be blamed (Braginsky, 1970; Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002; Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; E.E. Jones & T.S. Pittman, 1982; J. Tedeschi & V. Melburg, 1984; Tedeschi, 1981). *Assertive tactics* refer to active but not aggressive ways of establishing a favourable impression: trying to look good (*ingratiation*), competent (*self-promotion*), morally worthy (*exemplification*) or dependent (*supplication*). Ingratiation is displayed in order to appear likeable by directing the target’s attention towards (real or pretended) kind characteristics, motives, or intentions, and away from unfavourable ones, or simply by making others feel good (Domelsmith & Dietch, 1978; Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; Jones, 1964; O’Connor & Simms, 1990; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Westphal & Stern, 2007; Wu, Yim, Kwan, & Zhang, 2012). Self-promotion tactics serve to convey an impression of competence to others (Falbo, 1977; Rudinow, 1978; Schütz, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). The aim of exemplification can be to elicit perceptions of integrity or morality, or to arouse guilt (Delery & Kacmar, 1998; E.E. Jones & T.S. Pittman, 1982). ‘Supplication’ refers to advertising one’s dependence in order to solicit help (Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; E.E. Jones & T.S. Pittman, 1982). Table (1) provides a general overview of the different strategies and related tactics.

Table 1: Manipulation Strategies and Tactics

<p>Offensive: e.g., yelling, threats, insistence, playing on a supposed weakness, sanctions, ridiculing, guilt induction, and hostility.</p>	<p>Defensive: one wants to place oneself or the (negative) event in a different light by fighting negative typifications (apologizing, denying, attribution of responsibility, reframing, justifying).</p>
<p>Protective: ‘passive avoidance’: e.g., avoiding blame, disapproval, questions or insight into one’s ideas and goals (e.g., avoiding public attention, saying as little as possible, cautious self-description).</p>	<p>Assertive: active but not aggressive ways of establishing a favourable impression: trying to look good (i.e., ingratiation), competent (i.e., self-promotion), morally worthy (i.e., exemplification) or dependent (i.e., supplication).</p>

3. METHODOLOGY

It is almost impossible to find any deep and comprehensive insights in existing research on the strategies and tactics that manipulators use in manipulative settings. Wilson et al. (1996) state that there is a great need to study Machiavellianism, which uses manipulation as a tool, in real-life situations. Most empirical manipulation studies have been undertaken in laboratory settings or else they employ a 'distant' survey research method, exceptions being Blickle (2003b) and D. Kipnis et al. (1980)). As a result of the use of artificial settings, knowledge about manipulators' 'real (work) life' play is missing. Moreover, as it is very difficult to find manipulators willing to reveal and share their intentions and related tricks in empirical research, we decided to obtain information from targets and witnesses.

3.1. The Qualitative Methodological Approach

In order to explore the phenomenon, namely manipulative behaviour at work, we used a qualitative methodological setting. The goals of our research were to identify, to understand, and to analyze manipulative behaviour at work. Our interest in the phenomenon was initially triggered by other people's accounts of their experiences. We decided to embark on a systematically structured research project, which follows a combination of elements of grounded theory. In the words of Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 12), grounded theory is a "*theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed throughout the research process*". In this sense, we followed an iterative process of data collection, data analysis, generating concepts and (re)development of analytical categories.

We seek to improve our understanding of malignant manipulators by basing our investigation on phenomenological psychology, the purpose of which is to have the participants describe in as faithful and detailed a manner as they can their experience of a situation that the investigator is seeking to understand (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The research goal was to disentangle the subjective experiences of targets and witnesses of malignant manipulation in order to gain a deeper insight into the strategies and tactics used by manipulators.

3.2. Sampling Strategy and Recruitment of Participants

The sampling process followed the principles of theoretical sampling, Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 45) describe it as "*a process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges*". We sought to identify individuals who would provide the information necessary for improving the conceptual and analytical framework as well as for identifying, describing and analysing the strategies and tactics used by manipulators.

The population from which samples were drawn for this study was defined as employees with recent exposure to manipulative behaviour, whether as targets or as witnesses. In this sense, we followed an iterative process of data collection, data analysis, concept generation and (re)development of analytical categories, in line with Mayering (2002).

We used two strategies for finding research participants: 1) placing a call on a Dutch website devoted to information on work stress, and 2) word-of-mouth communication. In the call we addressed potential participants as follows:

Did the following ever happen to you? A colleague or supervisor influenced your feelings, behaviour and/or thoughts and this influence (finally) turned out bad for you and/or others? In short: did you ever perceive yourself as a target or witness of a manipulator; a misleading colleague and/or superior?

Thus, to find victims and witnesses, we very briefly described the phenomenon of malignant manipulation. This also means that, remaining loyal to our phenomenological approach, when an individual perceives that he/she is a victim or witness, we take this as truth. Five participants responded to the website call, and five participants responded to our word-of-mouth communication. Our pool of ten respondents includes one pair who shared a single manipulator. The participants' ages ranged from 28 to 62; three were male, and seven were female. All had higher education qualifications (BA or MA). One held a senior management position; the others held positions without leadership responsibilities in education, health care, ICT, and consulting. Their 'manipulation tenure' varied from six weeks to three years. Eight participants experienced manipulation only by superiors and/or others in management positions. Two experienced manipulation by superiors, other managers *and* subordinates and/or colleagues. Six participants experienced 'multiple manipulators'.

3.3. Data Collection

We conducted open-ended interviews with seven respondents, and three sent us their stories by email. Of these three, one opted for total discretion by sending thirty-three emails from an anonymous email account, never disclosing her full name. The duration of the face-to-face interviews was from 1.5 to 3.5 hours.

Our interviews aimed to let the participants describe their experiences in detail and in chronological order. Each began with an explanation about how we intended to use the information that we obtained, including a guarantee of full confidentiality. After the introduction, the interview began with a general question: Could you tell us your story? We then asked explicitly about the negative consequences of the manipulator's behaviour, and the role of other organizational members.

We informed the respondents that we would supply them with a verbatim interview transcript, so that they could make corrections and supplement the text when they recalled additional relevant information. Six out of the seven interviewees supplied supplementary material, which included diary notes, dossiers, emails, and job performance reports. After receiving the transcript of their interview, four interviewees expressed concern about confidentiality. To allay their fears, we promptly sent them and the others completed segments of the Findings section of our report. After they read this, all agreed to our further use of their experiences. Moreover, before submission we sent the manuscript to all respondents and asked them to report any lingering concerns about confidentiality.

3.4. Data Analysis

Because of concerns about confidentiality and anonymity, the individual cases will not be presented in isolation; rather, a cross-case analysis will be reported in such a way that individual participants are not identifiable. For analyzing the data (i.e., interviews, dossiers, diary notes, emails), we abided by three analytical procedures suggested by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). *First*, the interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. *Second*, all transcriptions and other written information were read together carefully. When we detected a shift in meaning, we made a written record. *Third*, the meanings expressed by the participants were made psychologically explicit by asking what kind of manipulation tactics (see theory section) the participants referred to. Moreover, a residual ‘open category’ was established for quotations not falling into one of the units of meaning catalogued above. Quotations in this category were analysed in order to construct further empirically-grounded types.

4. FINDINGS

This section is in two parts. In the General Findings section, we report on general tendencies and patterns. Then, we present qualitative in-depth information on perceptions of the strategies and tactics employed by manipulators, as reported by the targets and witnesses. In processing and analysing the data, it emerged that strategies and tactics could change over the ‘life-cycle’ of the relationship with the manipulator. Thus, we organized the presentation of strategies and tactics according to the following stages of the interpersonal relationship between the manipulator and the target: Acquaintance Stage – Irritation Stage – Reflection Stage – Termination Stage.

4.1. General Findings

Two participants were never themselves exposed to offensive tactics. A third participant had only once been a target of offensive tactics, which occurred when he told the manipulator of his intention to resign his post. However, these three participants were the objects of assertive, protective, and defensive tactics. The remaining participants had been direct victims of assertive, offensive, protective, and defensive tactics. All participants also witnessed the victimization of others.

Nine of the ten participants had experienced manipulation only from individuals in leadership positions. Three participants experienced ‘multiple manipulators’: different people in leadership positions, subordinates, and/or colleagues. All participants claimed that their manipulators used a variety of tactics, emphasizing that they consciously and intentionally behaved the way they did (i.e. they wanted to establish and maintain power over others), and stated that they themselves were “*not the only one*”. The manipulators also created other victims (up to 50 persons within one company) and got assistance from subordinates, colleagues, and/or management. In four cases, top management seemed to participate in ‘institutional bullying’: offensive tactics were adopted to get rid of employees over a certain age (i.e., age

discrimination), or who criticized top management, or who no longer fitted into organisational culture or who were or had been unwell.

Furthermore, seventeen of the twenty-four manipulators were operating in organisations with a human resource manager on the staff. All nine participants who suffered from these manipulators complained that the HR manager was aware of their situation but either did nothing or even acted as the manipulator's accomplice. Moreover, three participants who needed to contact the company medical doctor because of their sick leave reported that they had been fearful that the doctor might leak their information to the manipulator.

In all cases of manipulators below a senior management position, senior management protected the manipulator by not taking action. In none of the cases was the manipulator dismissed because of his/her behaviour, while nine participants had already left or were planning to leave the organisation: four had already been dismissed, two were awaiting their dismissal (and were already involved in legal procedures), while four had 'escaped'. In only one case was the manipulator dismissed, but this was officially for reasons unrelated to the behaviour (i.e. to reorganisation).

Six of the ten participants reported illnesses lasting for several weeks or months. Six participants sought and accepted psychological counselling; two were planning to do so. The six who had received guidance were diagnosed with depression, burn-out, anxiety disorder (including panic attacks), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The participants who until the study had not sought counselling and/or had short 'manipulator tenure' (i.e. six weeks) showed severe symptoms and problems related to the manipulations, including problems in concentration and sleeping, low self-esteem, distrust, and negative emotions (including fantasies about physically hurting or killing the manipulator), and aggression (including the ritual murder of manipulator figures). Each of the three participants who had never or only once experienced offensive tactics towards themselves suffered, in addition to their distress, relationship problems with partners including loss of libido and increased alcohol consumption.

Eight of the ten participants reported that several of their colleagues were involved in employment law procedures. All participants reported 'withdrawal behaviours' and suboptimal performance. With respect to their organizations, six participants referred to turnover rates of up to two hundred per cent a year and difficulties in attracting adequately-skilled staff.

Finally, four participants mentioned their manipulator's involvement in (semi-) criminal activities, including dubious money transfers to subsidiary companies, forgery, fraud, creative accounting, refusing to pay mandatory pension contributions, searching employee's (e-)mail accounts, using someone's name without permission for business transactions, corruption, unfair competition, illegal price-fixing and violating the law on workplace councils and/or intellectual property rights.

The following sections provide a more detailed account of the strategies and tactics deployed during the different stages of the relationship life-cycle. The descriptions of the different strategies have already identified a categorization of the respective tactic in parenthesis, i.e. *opinion conformity*.

4.2. Stage 1: The Acquaintance Stage

Six of the participants met their manipulators during the application procedure, while four of them met over the course of their organizational stay. These four refer to a good working climate, recalling that they felt at home in the employing organization before the manipulator(s) entered the stage.

Six participants claimed that their manipulators initially 'looked good', describing them as charming, empathic, friendly, jovial, maternal or paternal, sympathetic, "a most charming womanizer", and/or "behaving as a pal". Four of the participants recalled how during the application procedure the manipulator(s) evoked positive self-perceptions (e.g., *self-confidence*, *self-esteem*). The senior manager remembers being positively surprised about being able during the initial face-to-face contact to secure an increase in the original pay and benefits offer of about a hundred per cent. Two targets of the same manipulator referred to something roughly falling into the commonplace classification 'too good to be true'. They had had other career plans, but the manipulator 'sold' them the job as "the chance of a lifetime". Each felt flattered that a person in such a position seemed to believe in their capacities. A social therapist recalls her positive job interview:

The advertisement did not mention that it was a job with leadership responsibilities. However, during the job interview the two managers, both psychiatrists, offered me a supervisor's position in the field of in-house care (bribery). I also had the strong impression that the two wanted to fraternize with me. They told me they wanted somebody who could do (and was already doing) more than their current employees ... and during the interview I had the idea that the common line was a shared understanding, based on competence, of the importance of appropriate therapeutic interventions (opinion conformity).

However, this participant, and also the one who was able to double his employment conditions, later recalled a noticeable occurrence: during the application procedure the manipulator(s) seemed to want to block any contact between them and the backstage, i.e. future colleagues, subordinates and supervisors. That imposition of a boundary, of a distance, clearly evidenced elementary protective behaviour.

Three participants sensed something odd.

In my job interview, the witch kept on nitpicking. She repeatedly asked me questions about how I would resolve certain situations. I sketched my actions in comparable, past situations, but remarked that an appropriate way of acting depends very much on specific situations. The witch responded, slightly irritated: "What [do you mean by] 'situation-related'?" (Authors' note: The participant imitated the manipulator's voice: a harsh, high-pitched and exaggerated or even theatrical voice. Such imitations of manipulators' voices occurred several times during our interviews).

Because of her reaction I got the feeling that I had done or said something stupid (i.e. offensive), but I didn't get a negative impression of her. I thought she acted in this way because she wanted the 'best' and to get the best out of employees.

Two participants vividly recalled the 'grande entrée' of their shared, manipulative managing director.

A 'meet and greet' was organized for ... (name manipulator). I was surprised about her. She had the face and attitude of a 'top of the bill' leader. An emotionless, "Botox-like" frozen face and a haughty air. An appearance just not normal for the culture of this organization (i.e., power display). She told us about her tough past jobs (i.e., positive expertise self-description). I was surprised and asked myself why a person with such great experience would sign "to this club" and I had the strong feeling that something was wrong. But what ... (name of manipulator) told us – her ideas about leadership and how she was planning to flesh out her function - sounded good (i.e., positive expertise self-description).

However, her colleague had a slightly different impression and detected unpleasant feelings. During a conversation with the new director, she learned that they had both previously worked for the same employer. As soon as the director became aware of this fact, she made negative comments about colleagues and even blamed one employee for sexual harassment (*offensive*).

4.3. Stage 2: The Irritation Stage

For all but one of the respondents, their story started out in a 'truly' positive way, or at least in a way that was not obviously negative. However, for two of them who were dismissed while still on probation, confusion began on the first day of employment or earlier. Two weeks before the social therapist's employment began, the managers who had initially offered her a supervisory position in full-time in-house care presented her with other, less attractive, conditions: 30 hours in out-patient care and 10 hours for project development. On the first day of the job, she learned from a colleague that she had to work full-time in out-patient care. Thus, the initial proposal seemed nothing but deceitful. She immediately discussed the marked discrepancy between her promised and actual terms of employment with the managers. Both feigned surprise and told her that there must have been a misunderstanding (*defensive 'denial'*), blaming the colleague who told her (*"blaming others for things that go wrong"*). They seemed sincere and promised her the supervisor position (*bribery*). However, her contract of employment failed to mention these promises.

The participant who described the manipulator as a 'demanding nitpicker' was amazed several times on her first day at work. She was surprised when she found out that the person formerly introduced to her as her supervisor had been dismissed. Her new supervisor, the nitpicker, pointedly said that she should be happy about this development *"but was not willing to go into details"*. Then she started to explain in great detail why the former supervisor was no good for anything (*offensive*). After her own dismissal, the participant called the dismissed supervisor to find out more about the situation. It turned out he had filed legal charges and stated that the manipulator was the source of his problems. However, this was not the only strange encounter on the first day. Instead of simply showing her the stationery cupboard, as the MA-level educated participant would normally expect, the supervisor handed her the things from it she needed; she blocked the cupboard from view, making it impossible to look inside, and insisted that our participant use a pencil instead of a pen (*offensive restricting physical freedom and insistence*).

Within a few days, the target of this manipulation had ‘collected’ further confusing experiences. The manipulator always loomed large and determined the atmosphere. For example, she openly and loudly shared all kind of detailed private information with subordinates, particularly rich details about her forthcoming wedding (*assertive self-disclosure and discussing interests and/or non-work related topics*). When the manipulator described her hen party as ‘great’, the target remarked that she must be very relieved since sometimes friends organize unpleasant surprises. The manipulator was enraged by this comment, responding that she “*told them explicitly that I do not want such surprises and when I say so it does not happen*”. She thus made it perfectly clear that things were going the way she wanted them to go (*offensive power display*). The manipulator also tried to transform the target into an accessory (*offensive ‘clean hands’ tactic*). The supervisor required her to actively follow all in-house courses organized by an external trainer as a ‘normal’ course participant. However, the supervisor’s covert plan was for the subordinate to assimilate and then take over those courses, a plan that she was forbidden to disclose to the trainer.

Two unconnected respondents in retrospect had strange sensations within several days of employment. They recalled an absence of normal written information that was very striking, along with the unavailability of numerous routine essential rudimentary resources, including documentation of periodic cash flow, computers, rooms, standard software, and stationery. One of the two wrote:

I was very surprised to see that all the information my predecessor had left to the organization was a 25-page document which he had received from the management board when he started two and a half years previously. There were no documents, no minutes, no memos, no files, and no folders. The document included an outdated organizational chart, a blueprint of the rooms, and not much else. Why ... (name) initially appeared friendly, it soon turned out she was hoarding strategic information, and in some instances passing on information and filtering information strategically.

The participant remarked he had the feeling this was done on purpose: to avoid questions about or insight into goals and ideas (*protective ‘withholding written information’*). After studying his transcript, he added “*in this organization people avoided taking minutes of meetings and agreements*”.

Although they did not know this at the time, within the first three months of their employment two targets of the same manipulative supervisor had similarly odd experiences, despite the fact that one had joined the department about two years after the other. The supervisor had made each of them feel good by flattering their work-related efforts, seeming to be helpful as well as concerned (*ingratiation tactics*). However, one reported that he shared his first original idea for a project with the manipulator, who insisted that he incorporate her feedback and add certain details. He followed her lead, only for the project to be firmly rejected. A letter from an external evaluator offered categorical advice that he: “*should not be influenced by ...*” (name manipulator). Moreover, the target said:

It was strange. I sent my original idea to ... (and here he named several colleagues). All responded positively. However, none of them ever asked me about the current work, the work done under

supervision of ... (name manipulator). It felt like a taboo and I got the idea that this work was inferior ... and I felt inferior.

The honesty of the manipulator's display of concern appears doubtful. Both targets got the opportunity to finish projects more quickly than required. One target raised this matter to their colleagues, who were all shocked because they believed it was "*almost impossible to finish the project so fast*". She then talked to her supervisor about their worrying reactions:

She took pity on me like an angry mother, suggesting that I talk to my colleagues. Later on, it seemed that this empathy was purely strategic, because those colleagues had obstructed her before. And even later, it turned out that her displays of empathy were always strategic.

However, while the manipulator obviously tried to make them feel good, both targets remember her offensive behaviour towards close associates. One recalled that a colleague had had a prolonged and serious conflict with the supervisor, ending in forced early retirement. This target did not communicate with colleagues about the details, but the manipulator repeatedly shared with subordinates her grievances about their "*poorly performing*" colleague. At one point, the two targets we interviewed were themselves transformed into opponents. Target one, who had been working for the supervisor for more than a year, requested a specific written document. The supervisor refused to provide it, appealing to changed organizational policies (*offensive 'lie of commission'*). However, within the first three months of employment target two had requested the same statement and received it with no problem at all (*bribery*). For target one, it became (again) very clear that she "*had fallen from grace*" and that target two was the new "*crown prince*" (*driving a wedge between people*; (P. Babiak & R.D. Hare, 2006)).

Finally, we briefly review the initially confusing experiences of the four participants who first met their manipulators during the course of their organizational stay. One of the two targets who faced the 'grand entrée' of their manipulative director reported that the latter was full of praise for her work during the first six months. After this period, however, the manipulator limited praise to superficial topics like her lunch-box and clothes (*assertive 'other enhancements'*). The other target also recalled chatting about clothes with the manipulator, who complimented her on her dress. The target emphasised her strong impression that the manipulator expected similar compliments in return (i.e., *assertive 'exchange'*), but when these were not forthcoming she simply made a remark about the uniqueness of her own dress. The rebuffed manipulator then became visibly angry, telling the target that she should not cope with such self-indulgent remarks since "*my mother let me walk in rags*" (*assertive 'self-disclosure' and defensive 'attribution of responsibility'*).

This was not the only 'self-disclosure' incident. For example, the manipulator told stories about the way she controlled her private life, including how she forced her husband to use a certain color by deceiving him (*assertive 'assertion'*). Moreover, she disclosed she was aware of her emotionless face and added that she rehearsed facial expressions in front of a mirror (*non-verbal attractiveness enhancement*). Not surprisingly, the receiver of this message received the idea that the 'grand entrée' was nothing but a performance.

For one target, the first ‘real’ doubts emerged when the company owner announced his plan to raise the standard of all employee communications. He intended to hire members of the religious sect to which he belonged and use the sect’s communication courses (*protective ‘collective brainwash’*). For our last target, who was a 59-year-old teacher, suspicion began after she had been more than twenty years in post, and within several weeks of the entry of a new management team:

Administration was very friendly during the first conversations: they offered me to work in secondary education ... and 200 per cent of my current salary.

However, these promises (*bribery*) were missing in the meeting report (*protective ‘withholding written information’*). She also noticed that the new principal regularly supported her ideas during meetings, promising to talk about them in detail later (*assertive ‘opinion conformity’*). However, he never had time to discuss them. Within several months of the installation of the new management team, several of her older colleagues had left the school. Only later did it become known that their departure was not entirely voluntary.

4.4. Stage 3: The Sense-Making and Escalation Stage

The two ‘early dismissed’ participants got very early wake-up calls. The joint superior humiliated a colleague of the social therapist during a group meeting, and the therapist noticed that a colleague and the superior together shifted the most difficult clients onto her. Both were less well educated than she was, yet the colleague perceived herself as the leader of in-house care, which was the more responsible position initially promised to the therapist.

Team supervision with an external supervisor, an intervention unwanted by her superior, was an eye-opener, strongly reinforcing her perception of the team’s problems. The therapist was asked to physically arrange her colleagues in the way she perceived their position in the team. She complied and arranged her colleagues, but none was either close to any other or to herself. However, she placed the superior at a very great distance from herself. When the supervisor asked the participants for their opinions about that, several responded that it was sad but true. The social therapist thought her superior was definitely offended. A week later, the informal in-care leader and the superior offered to guide one of her clients to an appointment (*assertive ‘helping others’*). The next week she learned that the ‘supporters’ used their offer of help against her; they accused her of sponging (*offensive ‘blaming the target’*) and reported it to senior management.

Following this incident and other group problems the senior managers, who were both psychiatrists, arranged a team meeting at which the superior – supported by the informal in-care leader - accused the participant of lying. None of the other colleagues said a word. Finally, one of the psychiatrists inflamed an already-sensitive situation by mentioning his long-term experience with group therapy and, consequently, familiarity with manipulation attempts (*positive expertise self-descriptions*). He accused the social therapist of manipulation (*offensive*), but added “*we will not fire you*” (*bribery*). As a reaction, she burst into tears.

Owing to the manipulator's moodiness and unpredictable behaviour, the 'nitpicker's' target felt increasingly insecure and developed self-doubt, wondering if she herself was responsible for the manipulator's behaviour? Seeking support and in order to reduce confusion, she began to share her experiences with a friend. In an email, she describes her 'Aha!' experience, the moment she realized that she was not the problem:

This morning I talked to the secretaries. They told me I had to stand up for myself, because otherwise I would drown. And that the behaviour I experienced was very normal (one moment nice, then ignoring, then bitchy).

The secretaries also warned her to be especially careful when the manipulator was in a very good mood, because "then she is up to something". The target had ideas about improving an evaluation form and the supervisor supported her ideas (*assertive 'opinion conformity'*). So the target worked on the task and prepared, as the manipulator had suggested, a departmental presentation. During the event, a colleague asked her repeatedly "On whose instructions are you doing this?" In our interview with her she remarked that "to each of his questions I could have responded with 'the bitch'", implying that he was inciting her to say so. A day prior to her presentation, the manipulator warned her about this specific colleague, calling him 'difficult' and a 'bugger' (*offensive*). After the presentation, this colleague indeed admitted that this was his intention, and remarked that many colleagues had problems with the supervisor and her moody behaviour.

After the presentation, the supervisor was full of praise for her, saying that "this turned out very well" and winking at her (*assertive 'other enhancement'*). The participant pointed to this behaviour as "over-exaggerated", and added that she felt uncomfortable about it. A few hours later, the supervisor had changed her mind. Now the presentation was not good at all, requesting her to work on it herself (*offensive*). For the target, this was her breaking point. Over the course of the next ten days the supervisor repeatedly observed that she had fallen short of expectations.

For our other participants, the intervals between (initial) confusion, awakening, and recognizing that they had become a target or witness of excesses took longer—from many months to several years. One participant, a senior manager, noticed more and more striking inconsistencies before further insights proved he had landed on a toxic playground. It started with experiencing a lack of rationality or reason. A senior manager became involved in every single decision, down to choosing the colour of toilet paper; he postponed or cancelled the management board without reasons, or simply abandoned ongoing meetings; a certain manager "appeared at department meetings without having been invited, changed the agenda to his liking, and massively interfered with discussions (*offensive 'insistence'*)". The participant added:

... it became clear to me that any decision in the organization would not be based on the quality of the proposal, on the marketability of the product, but rather on the personal approval of the organization owner (power display). So, in this heavily regulated environment...influenced by legal provisions with standard requirements...the discretion of the management board would be limited, I thought. ... I found out that there were massive variations in terms of conditions of employment which were not justified

by skills, performance or any other usual reason (lack of rationality). Rather, it was the personal relationship to ... (name) at the time of concluding the contract which was decisive (power display)

The following diverse experiences convinced him of the organization's toxicity, and especially that of the director and his accomplice: creative accounting, dubious money transfers to subsidiaries, searching e-mail accounts illegally, using someone's name for business transactions without permission, corruption, unfair competition, misuse of loyalty tests for employees 'rebellion probability' (*protective tactic*) and *blacklisting* (*offensive, but also 'useful' for protecting the organization from undesired employees*):

What I also felt very disturbing was that apparently the organization maintained very close links with its competitors in the market despite fierce competition. I learned that there were blacklists of employees who had fallen from grace with one of the companies, and it appears to be agreement between the companies not to hire blacklisted employees or promote them to senior positions.

When the manipulator was his "crown princess", she shared with another target some of his 'recipes' (*i.e., self-disclosure*). The company had two car parks with separate access points but the director had blocked access to one, forcing all employees to use the other one, of which he had a full view of from his office. She asked the director about this and he explained he wanted to oversee the coming and going of his employees (*i.e., offensive 'restricting physical freedom' and assertive 'power display'*). This manipulator also *used spies*. "To make them feel comfortable", he invited applicants together with their partners to a dinner party at which his girlfriend was also present. His girlfriend's task was to interrogate the partner, especially about intentions to have children. The director believed that people with children lacked adequate motivation for work. This tactic referred to encounters in which a manipulator used non-targets to elicit helpful information, which is clearly an astute and self-protective dramaturgical move, inasmuch as the manipulator does not act openly. Finally, the target remembered an offensive 'hands clean' tactic. Her manipulator upgraded his image by emphasizing his connections to industrial associations (*assertive 'claims of membership in a competent group'*). He disliked the chair of one such organization and spread the rumour that this man wanted to quit his job. The target told the director she felt this was dishonest and he responded "I don't care. I want this guy out".

Despite these early signals, she became fully aware of his dangerous character only when he tried to transform her into an accomplice (*offensive 'clean hands' tactic*). After several months, the manipulator told her to be aggressive in looking for reasons to dismiss her subordinate. This once-appreciated employee had fallen from grace because of her illness. Our participant became herself a target after a car accident. When she returned to work, she noticed that the director had ceased to share information with her, he ignored requests for meetings, he repeatedly accused her of underperformance and, finally, he accused her of expense account fraud (*offensive criminalizing the target*).

The pair who shared a single manipulator showed a different pattern of awakenings and excesses: one target refers to three breaking points, the other to a cumulative sequence of negative and/or alarming experiences. We begin with the breaking points. The first target

confronted the manipulator with rumours that a colleague had lodged an official complaint. The manipulator suggested telling him the story over a beer (*assertive 'discussing interests'*). A few days later, the manipulator announced in a meeting that the complaint had been declared unfounded by management (*defensive 'attribution of responsibility'*), saying the complainant suffered from borderline personality disorder (*offensive plus 'blaming others for things that go wrong'*). However, in the meantime, unknown to the manipulator, the complainant had provided him with corroborating written evidence, so he realized that the manipulator was lying. Shortly after this incident, he found it strange that the manipulator invited him to attend a conference. He could remember that a year earlier a colleague – the other participating target – had been unable to attend this conference because of the cost. He thus interpreted the offer for him to travel abroad as an attempt to 'buy his loyalty' (*bribery*). To prove that this was the case, he told the manipulator he wanted to book one of the most expensive hotels in town, to which she raised no objection.

The third breaking-point occurred when, once again, the informant caught the manipulator lying and involved in bribery. His work responsibilities had increased substantially and he thus sought a new contract at a higher salary. The manipulative supervisor agreed to the request, telling him that she had ordered the personnel advisor to arrange it. Over several months, the target repeatedly asked the supervisor when he could expect the new terms, and on several occasions the supervisor assured him that it was coming, blaming the personnel manager for the delay (*defensive 'attribution of responsibility' and 'blaming others for things that go wrong'*). Finally, he talked to the personnel manager, who said that his supervisor had never requested a new contract for him.

This narrative corroborates the long list of disturbing experiences mentioned by the other target. The manipulator frequently had changed ideas about project contents, as well as departmental and lower-level tasks and targets. Consequently, the subordinates had difficulties in determining exactly what was required by the tasks, and they complained about being unable to do their own jobs (*assertive 'changing operative goals'*). Furthermore, the manipulator used every opportunity to establish her image as a competent person. For example, she introduced an expertise centre and an award with publicity (*entitlements*), greatly exaggerating their importance (*competence enhancements*), and was always keen to invite experts and VIPs (*appeals to upward contacts and coalitions*).

The two targets also reported unusual behaviours. One recalled that the manipulator was repetitive "*like a broken record*" in her enthusiasm, telling the participant that someone told her that she was "*the perfect combination of beauty and brains*" (*self-disclosure and attractiveness enhancement*). The other witnessed how the manipulator handed a present to her supervisor, while afterwards saying, "*This is how you have to treat him*" (*self-disclosure and bribery*). Moreover, the manipulator restricted the participants' physical freedom by expecting them to join her in the canteen, and to remain with her at the same table during social events with other departments or at external events. In retrospect, the targets assumed that by 'restricting physical freedom' the supervisor wanted to show to outsiders that the group was intact and well-functioning (*attractiveness enhancement*) when in fact it was not (*defensive 'denial'*). Both

assumed that the manipulator was suspicious of outsiders becoming aware of her outrages simply from talking to her subordinates (*protective 'minimizing social interaction'*).

Finally, both targets reported a wide repertoire of disturbing behaviours, among which were: 'flattering some to make others feel bad', making fun of a subordinate who collapsed at work, forcing a subordinate to work at the office of a direct colleague who had died just two days previously, labelling people incompetent and spreading vicious rumours and lies - including accusations about mental illness, alcoholism, promiscuity, and sexual harassment.

We now turn to the other manipulator with two 'testifying' targets. As mentioned in the last section, the manipulator's behaviour changed suddenly after six months. She became whimsical, ill-humored, frequently missed meetings and, as in other cases, drove a wedge between people by treating some well while humiliating others (including both targets). She sabotaged employees and the organization in general (*offensive*) by destroying several committees, talking with an external organization about acquisition, abolishing and outsourcing routine organisational work without the authority to do so, and telling clients about the poor performance of some employees. Several colleagues of the targeted informants heard about the latter from clients who found the new "*bad*" director "*strange*."

The two targets reacted differently to this situation. One showed burn-out symptoms and was on sick leave for several weeks, while the other did not seem to suffer. When the former returned to work, matters went from bad to worse. On sick leave she had applied successfully to another company. The manipulator's first reaction was very positive; she flattered the participant about her strength to make an application under such circumstances. In the next sentence, with a bright-coloured 'contorted' face she asked "*Was it an easy application?*" The participant remarked that "*it was like you saw the devil raised inside her*". We call this behaviour *flip flop*: an extreme and sudden change in interaction, from that of a 'normal' emotional affect and corresponding facial expression to an 'evil' one in a split second. Two other targets (with different manipulators) also experienced such behaviour, and it is striking that all three described it in comic language. They began to mimic the deeply negative 'role' of the manipulator, imitating an 'unnatural' voice and, less surprisingly, a tone of taking offence (*offensive tactic*).

In the months and years following his initial confusion, the employee of the director who is (openly) a member of a religious sect faced a growing number of alarming signals. The director splashed money around, including inviting all employees to the Caribbean (*bribery*) and buying a private swimming pool on the company account. He sabotaged the (mandatory) foundation of a works council, refused to pay mandatory pension contributions, and took measures leading to an overwhelming number of customer complaints. The following (*offensive 'power display'*) situation was a revelation to the target. The director ignored important employment legislation and dismissed all four members of his management team immediately after they had informed him of the company's dire financial problems. Playing to an audience of all employees present, he ordered a taxi for each one - 'deporting' them in a highly visible taxi parade. All those so degraded and humiliated filed charges against the company and won their cases. Our participant remains in post, calling the organization a "*golden cage*" with extremely good salaries (*bribery*) and thus difficult to leave.

The teacher's confusion about seeing several older employees leaving several months later then turned into an awakening:

While I was on leave the director sent me two emails, which were too friendly ... just to let me experience how friendly he is (perception of 'insincere' concern and attractiveness enhancement). However, these emails are totally conflicting with the fact that he claimed in a report that I was illicitly absent for a funeral (offensive). He never asked me about that, and I had permission for leave from the vice-principal.

This seemed to be the starting point of a campaign against her. For several months, the management team tried over and over again to demonstrate her alleged low performance and 'incompetence'. After a while, she went on sick leave. The authors are still in contact with her, and are able to reveal that she has remained on sick leave for more than year and is involved in a lawsuit.

4.5. Stage 4: The Termination Stage

So, what happened to our participants and how do they perceive the role of HR and senior management? In none of the cases were the manipulators dismissed because of their behaviour, while nine of the ten participants left the organization: four were dismissed, one was awaiting her dismissal, and four had 'escaped'. As for the nitpicker's target, she lost her job but discovered something which was, for her at least, very disturbing. Several hours after her dismissal, the manipulator revealed herself by tweeting "*The winner takes all*".

In only one case was the manipulator dismissed, but officially this was for reasons unrelated to the behaviour (but related to reorganisation). Eight participants had to deal with their HR managers. They all complained that HR had been aware of the situation but had either done nothing or had acted as the manipulator's accomplice. Moreover, all participants stated they felt left alone and ignored by senior management. Five of the participants reported that they had been ill for several weeks or months. Five participants sought and accepted psychological counselling; one was planning to do so. The five who received guidance were diagnosed with depression, burn-out, anxiety disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The participants who until the date of publication had not sought counselling and/or had short 'manipulator tenure' (i.e. six weeks) showed severe symptoms and problems related to the manipulations, including problems in concentration and sleeping, negative self-perceptions, distrust, panic attacks, negative emotions, and aggressive ideation (including the ritual murder of manipulator figures). Three participants who had never or only once experienced offensive tactics towards themselves suffered a variety of maladies, including relationship problems with their partners and increased alcohol consumption. All participants reported 'withdrawal behaviours' and diminished or failed performance.

5. DISCUSSION

Our qualitative study supplements the existing literature in that it yields in-depth, real-life descriptions of often abstractly-defined manipulation strategies and tactics. In addition, in line with the grounded theory approach, two issues emerged from our research, which extend the existing literature and can inform future empirical research on the topic.

5.1. Strategies and Tactics

The accounts by our participants show that manipulators use mixed (or combined) strategies and tactics: They did not use only offensive tactics; they *also* displayed an array of non-offensive tactics towards their target. While defensive and protective tactics are being used, ingratiation and self-promotion tactics predominate. It is striking that none of the research participants brought to the surface any tactics evidencing efforts to come across as morally worthy (*exemplification*) or dependent (*supplication*).

In addition, our research unveiled a number of previously unknown and/or unexplored tactics, such as collective brainwashing, 'flip flop', restricting physical freedom, 'hands clean', offensive power display, withholding written information, blacklisting, using spies, and criminalizing the target. This revised list of tactics can inform further research.

Research into unethical behaviour can profit by explicitly including manipulation knowledge. To date, research on bullying, discrimination, and harassment for the most part focuses on offensive behaviours. However, the findings of the present study show that assertive, protective, and defensive behaviours can also be harmful. In addition, our research shows that those who had begun as the heirs apparent could end up as victims of psychological violence. Thus, more approaches covering non-offensive manipulations and the 'entire' social environment in addition to the 'whole story' could be useful. The same conclusion applies to research on other dark sides of organizations, such as abusive, toxic, and destructive leadership (S. Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010) and organizational crime (Braithwaite, 1989; Schrager & Short, 1978).

5.2. Dynamics

The case analyses informed us about the development of the strategies and tactics used by manipulators over the lifecycle of an individual relationship, i.e. the whole story from beginning to end, as perceived by either target or witness. Regrettably, we are not able to analyse case-by-case accounts of manipulation on account of confidentiality and anonymity agreements.

However, from our exploratory research it seems to emerge that the manipulators' behaviour evolves from non-offensive to offensive, using offensive tactics as a last resort to reach their goals. Initially, these manipulators implicitly seem to behave in line with Falbe and Yukl's (1992) findings: non-offensive tactics are more effective than offensive tactics for gaining control or power over others. As such, the manipulators in this category might be referred to as over-ambitious micro-politicians. However, others display offensive behaviour that is direct (i.e. towards the target) or indirect (i.e. with the eventual target as a witness) from the outset. Since

self-unmasking of someone's aggressive or dangerous side from the start lays a dark shadow over subsequent attempts to appear competent or likeable, it is questionable whether such behaviour can be considered as strategic or political. Although we formulate our hypothesis with great caution, we are inclined to suppose that manipulators in this category represent one of the 'dark triad' personalities.

5.3. Limitations

There are of course a number of limitations needing to be discussed. To start with, one might argue that the small number of cases is a serious shortcoming. However, in line with the grounded theory approach we argue that our research followed a theoretical sampling strategy, i.e. we ceased to make additional observations when we felt that the information provided by the existing cases had sufficiently covered the phenomenon under investigation.

In our view, the major limitation is that – on account of undertakings of confidentiality and anonymity – the case-related stories as such did not remain intact and were chopped into fragments for the purpose of cross-case analysis. The serious challenge for the future is thus to find participants who can share their anonymized 'whole story' publicly, which would also permit contextual description and analysis. This is a rather difficult endeavour since many victims and witnesses are fearful and/or involved in legal procedures, including those with gagging clauses. Moreover, even when anonymized, many holistically presented cases can be traced down with persistence to identifiable victims and organizations.

Finally, we neither engaged in a discussion of what makes a potential or effective manipulator or target, nor did we elaborate on the normative aspects of whether and when manipulative behaviour is morally reprehensible. The concept of malignant manipulation was chosen to target the bi-dimensional facets of the bright, positive, enjoyable and sweet sides of manipulation, which is combined with the dark 'toxic' side, i.e. the negative effects for the target and/or the organization. Despite the negative connotation of 'toxic', the emphasis is on the phenomenon of impact in the sense its detriment to the interests of the target. Our focus was on the identification of observable behaviour, i.e. the specific tactics adopted by the manipulator. The discussion of what determines this behaviour, be it related to a particular type of personality, leadership strategy, micropolitics or organizational culture, should be addressed in further research. Both aspects have different potential implications, ranging from the psychological disorders of corporate psychopaths to legitimate opportunistic strategies in specific configurations of office politics.

6. CONCLUSION

After reviewing the literature on manipulation strategies and tactics, our analysis of the reports of manipulation targets and witnesses assisted us in advancing the existing categorizations, both by identifying additional manipulation tactics previously neglected in the literature and also by elaborating on the dynamics (or nature) of the processes of manipulation. Thus, at a very general

level, this study adds to the existing theoretical and empirical literature, and its findings can inform future research.

In addition, our study has several additional implications. *First*, research on the ‘Dark Side’ of working life (e.g. bullying, discrimination, and harassment, mobbing, corporate psychopaths) could empirically and theoretically analyse the perpetrators as manipulators.

Second, our study indicates that the consequences of malignant manipulation can be devastating for victims and witnesses, including long-term severe psychological and related physical problems, relational problems, distrust, dismissal, and a serious risk of becoming (innocently) involved in (semi-)criminal activities.

Third, our findings can be helpful for management, works councils, confidential advisors, and trade unions in detecting malignant manipulation in their organizations. Certainly a combination of the following ‘symptoms’ should be seriously alarming: complaints; rumours; assumptions about (or verified) high staff turnover; poor staff retention; difficulties in attracting employees; long-term sick leave; (semi-)criminal activities; HR bribery (‘broken promises’); an unusual number of deviant labour contracts without rational explanation; conflicts within and between organizations, departments, and people; low production quality and quantity; lacking resources; failing projects; repeatedly changing operational goals; extremely good and bad accounts of one and the same person; and unethical behaviour. Organizations should be aware that ignoring these signals can work against them when victims turn to costly lawsuits. For advice on how to deal with and, even better, prevent workers and organizations from vicious manipulators, we refer to the work of colleagues such as Babiak and Hare’s (2006) ‘Snakes in Suits’ and Sutton’s (2007) ‘The No Asshole Rule’.

Finally, our study might be helpful but it might also be a warning to (future) victims of malignant manipulation. The findings indicate that victims should not expect support from insiders (e.g. senior management or HR managers) or outsiders. Moreover, victims should be prepared that people who are called upon for help very often protect and support the manipulator and turn against those who call on them.

Developing policies to address the issue of malignant manipulation in order to avoid detrimental effects on employee and organizational outcomes warrants attention to at least two other issues, which should be elaborated on by future research. First, the question naturally arises as to the determinants of manipulative behaviour, which then would require different treatment and/or policies concerning job design, selection, HR development, and performance management. Is such behaviour an issue of personality (disorder), a pathological phenomenon, related to performing a certain organizational role, or the consequence of a particular organizational environment? Concerning the latter two factors, an interesting question would be to identify organizational and job design elements linked to HR policies and practices likely to increase the probability of someone using manipulative tactics. It might well be that a particular business model is built upon influencing customer preferences and behaviour in order to increase revenues. The sales positions might require a specific configuration of personal characteristics and skills, which are sought after in the selection process but which could also increase the probability of that person using employing manipulative tactics in the workplace. In a similar vein, organizations might provide incentives for employees in a ways that attract

'potentially' malignant manipulators and cause them to self-select themselves into such organizations, e.g. through providing incentives for extremely risky and/or competitive behaviour in order to achieve the position's (and thus the organization's) goals.

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