Masculinity might be more toxic than we think: The influence of gender roles on trait emotional manipulation

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A B S T R A C T

Previous research has established sex differences in emotional manipulation; specifically, men are more likely than women to engage in emotional manipulation. This study aimed to explicate these sex differences by investigating, for the first time, the influence of gender roles in the prediction of trait emotional manipulation. Participants were 435 females and 139 males ($N = 574$) who reported their levels of masculine and feminine gender roles, as well as primary and secondary psychopathy, trait emotional intelligence, and trait emotional manipulation. Separate regressions were conducted for each sex. As predicted, for both males and females, masculine gender roles positively predicted emotional manipulation. For males, no other predictors were significant, however there was evidence of statistical suppression for feminine gender roles. For females, low female gender roles, high primary and secondary psychopathy, and high emotional intelligence all significantly predicted emotional manipulation; the effect of emotional intelligence was via statistical suppression. This study represents an important first step in understanding the interplay between socialisation and emotional manipulation. Future research would benefit from using a longitudinal approach to determine whether emotional manipulation can be reduced through shifting gender roles.

1. Introduction

The original conceptualisation of emotional intelligence (EI) recognised the potential for emotional skills to be used for both positive and nefarious purposes (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Despite this original conceptualisation, Austin, Farrelly, Black, and Moore (2007) argued that existing measures of EI were largely prosocial in nature and a paucity existed in the measurement of manipulating others' emotions for antisocial ends. Thus, the construct of emotional manipulation emerged in the literature as the 'dark side' of EI (Austin et al., 2007). Subsequent measurement of emotional manipulation for antisocial purposes has shown that, compared to females, males are more likely to engage in this negative form of emotional intelligence (Bacon & Regan, 2016; Hyde & Grieve, 2018). The aim of the current study was to further understanding of the nomological network of emotional manipulation by examining the influence of masculine and feminine genders roles[1] in (self-reported) emotional manipulation ability.

1.1. What predicts emotional manipulation? The story so far

There are various (generally antisocial) predictors of emotional manipulation, including trait narcissism (Austin & O'Donnell, 2013; Austin, Saklofske, Smith, & Tohver, 2014; Hyde & Grieve, 2014; Nagler, Reiter, Furtner, & Rauthmann, 2014), Machiavellianism (Abell, Brewer, Qualter, & Austin, 2016; Austin et al., 2007; Austin & O'Donnell, 2013), aggression (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013), controlling tendencies (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017), and insincerity (Austin & Vahle, 2016; Grieve, 2011). Trait psychopathy is a particularly reliable predictor of emotional manipulation (see Austin et al., 2014; Austin & O'Donnell, 2013; Burns, Roberts, Egan, & Kane, 2015; Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Grieve, Witteveen, & Tolan, 2014; Hyde & Grieve, 2014; Nagler et al., 2014). The relationship between psychopathy and the use of emotional manipulation for nefarious purposes is foreseeable, given than primary psychopathy is characterised by malevolence, callousness, and deception, and that secondary psychopathy relates conceptually to disagreeable and troublemaking behaviours (see Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

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[1] Per Wood and Eagly (2002), we use the term 'sex' to denote the grouping of people into biological categories; 'gender' refers to the meanings society ascribes to these categories.

Other individual differences are also apparent, with males consistently reporting engaging in more emotional manipulation than females (Bacon & Regan, 2016; Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Hyde & Grieve, 2018). Given that emotional manipulation is a feature of EI, and research has shown women have greater emotional (particularly interpersonal EI) skills compared to men (e.g., Cabello, Sorrel, Fernández-Pinto, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2016; O'Connor & Brown, 2016), it is curious that males report more perpetration of emotional manipulation than women. As emotional manipulation is, by definition, an interpersonal emotional construct (Austin et al., 2007), further investigation of this sex difference is warranted.

Predictors of emotional manipulation also vary between males and females. For example, in studies using a multivariate approach, EI emerges as a suppressor variable for females only; that is, contributing significantly to the multivariate model while having a low bivariate correlation with emotional manipulation (see Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013). EI acting as a suppressor variable only for females suggests potential for a systematic difference in the prediction of emotional manipulation as a function of sex.

1.2. Potential explanations for sex differences in emotional manipulation

There are a number of theoretical explanations for sex differences in psychological constructs (Hyde, 2014) that may provide a useful framework when considering emotional manipulation's nomological network. Evolutionary explanations, such as sexual selection, can delineate why males and females may engage in different behaviours. For example, sex differences in aggression might be a result of sexual selection (e.g., Archer, 2009). Still, it is difficult to explain why one sex would be more likely to engage in emotional manipulation (i.e., a form of covert aggression). It is possible that in efforts to enhance reproductive success, males will emotionally manipulate potential partners and rivals. However, females would also gain reproductive benefits from emotionally manipulating potential partners and rivals. In fact, the evolutionary view holds that females may be likely to engage in more indirect aggression than males, as indirect aggression allows females to enter a dominance hierarchy without potentially damaging their reproductive health through physical contests (Ingram, 2014). Furthermore, perceived mate value predicts competitor derogation for both males and females (Chaudhary, Al-Shawaf, & Buss, 2018). As such, sexual selection does not appear to adequately explain observed sex differences in emotional manipulation.

Cognitive social learning theories propose that reinforcement and punishment shape behaviour (Hyde, 2014). These processes should not vary as a function of sex per sé; however, what is considered appropriate behaviour—and thus whether a particular behaviour is punished or rewarded—can differ depending on whether the individual is male or female. Therefore, learned behaviours such as emotional expression will reflect societal expectations (Guastello & Guastello, 2003). This interpretation also aligns with sociocultural approaches that posit male and female roles have differentiated over time stemming from biologically-grounded division of labour (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Based on this division of labour, male roles are considered agentic and reflect power, dominance, and action, whereas female roles are considered communing, nurturing, affiliative, and passive (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

Based on these societal expectations, emotional manipulation would play out differently for males and females. Current operationalisations of emotional manipulation (e.g., Austin et al., 2007; Hyde & Grieve, 2014) reflect a more active and dominating interpersonal style, potentially explaining the noted sex differences in emotional manipulation (e.g., Bacon & Regan, 2016; Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Hyde & Grieve, 2018). This explanation would also align with bullying research indicating that gender differences might be explained through socialised norms (e.g., Smith et al., in press). As such, a gender role socialisation perspective holds promise in

explaining sex differences in emotional manipulation.

1.3. The current study

In summary, sex differences in emotional manipulation are not fully understood. This study took a novel approach to unpacking these sex differences by investigating whether gender roles influence emotional manipulation. Previous predictors of emotional manipulation such as primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy, and trait EI (e.g., Austin et al., 2014; Burns et al., 2015; Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Hyde & Grieve, 2014; Nagler et al., 2014) were also included, to examine whether gender roles had explanatory power over and above those other characteristics.

Previously, males have scored higher than females on emotional manipulation (Bacon & Regan, 2016; Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013). Given the agentic nature of emotional manipulation items (see Austin et al., 2007), it was hypothesised that masculine gender roles would positively predict self-reported emotional manipulation ability, and that feminine gender roles would negatively predict self-reported emotional manipulation ability. To allow any effects of sex to be clearly examined, data were analysed separately for males and females.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 435 females and 139 males ($N = 574$) invited to take part in an anonymous online personality study. The average age was 31.45 years ($SD = 13.11$). The university's ethics committee approved the study. Prospective participants were invited via social media posts (e.g., Facebook). An *a priori* power analysis (Green, 1991) indicated that a sample size of 109 (i.e., $N \geq 104 + m$, where m is the number of predictors) was required to detect medium size effects for individual predictors within the multiple regression model: this was comfortably met for both the male and female samples.

2.2. Measures

Emotional manipulation was assessed following Grieve and Mahar's (2010) and Nagler et al.'s (2014) methods, whereby the 10 strongest loading items from Austin et al.'s (2007) emotional manipulation subscale were used. Participants indicate their agreement to statements (e.g., *I know how to play two people off against each other*) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.91, indicating excellent internal reliability.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory short-form (BSRI short-form; Bem, 1974) was used to measure self-reported gender roles, comprising 20 items: 10 items measuring each of masculine and feminine gender roles. Participants indicate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = always or almost always untrue; 7 = always or almost always true) how well each masculine (e.g., *assertive, independent*; Cronbach's alpha = 0.93) and feminine (e.g., *gentle, compassionate*; Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) adjective describes themselves. Total scores for masculinity and femininity are then calculated. These alphas were similar to those seen previously (e.g., March, Grieve, Marx, & Witteveen, 2013).

Primary and secondary psychopathy was measured using the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy scale (Levenson et al., 1995). Primary psychopathy is measured with 16 items (e.g., *Success is based on survival of the fittest; I am not concerned about the losers*) and secondary psychopathy with 10 items (e.g., *I don't plan anything very far in advance*), where 1 = disagree strongly, and 4 = agree strongly. In the current study, reliability was good for primary psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.84$) and acceptable for secondary psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.67$), consistent with previous research (e.g., Grieve & Panebianco, 2013).