



The dark side of emotion at work: Emotional manipulation in everyday and work place contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether self-reported willingness to emotionally manipulate (EM) day-to-day and willingness to manipulate at work are related constructs, by analysing the factor structures and relationships of the Trait EM Willingness in General and Work Scale, as well as considering gender effects. Respondents (567 employees; 365 females, 199 males, 3 other) were asked how often they engaged in various manipulative behaviours in day-to-day and work contexts. Exploratory and Confirmatory factor analyses analysed split halves of the responses. Three factors emerged: Work-Related Malicious EM Willingness, General Malicious EM Willingness, and Disingenuousness (items reflecting insincerity and deceit), demonstrating a contextual influence on malicious EM. The three-factor structure fitted the data well and was reliable, however, discriminant validity was not evident as Work-Related and General Malicious EM Willingness were highly correlated. The correlations demonstrate the trait-like consistency of malicious manipulation. The model achieved better fit for the male data, indicating the superiority of items at measuring EM in males. Endorsement of malicious EM at work was higher in males, consistent with the masculine-agentic and feminine-communal traits in social role theory. These findings add to understanding of the dark side of emotion, and reveal another layer of complexity to this problematic work behaviour.

1. Introduction

Emotional manipulation (EM) involves influencing another individual's feelings for one's own self-interest or benefit (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). EM is considered to represent the 'darker side' of emotional intelligence (EI) (Austin et al., 2007). The emotional management of others falls under the sociability factor of trait EI (Petrides et al., 2016). While emotional management can be used in beneficial ways (for example, making someone feel proud in order to motivate them, Berkovich & Eyal, 2017), emotional manipulation is self-serving and potentially harmful, reflecting the use of EI for non-social purposes (e.g. Austin, Saklofske, Smith, & Tohver, 2014). EI is a well-established predictor of better job performance (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). For example, individuals with higher EI cope better with work stress (Goody, Gavin, Ashkanasy, & Thomas, 2014). However, there is less research investigating whether more emotionally intelligent individuals may use their skills to the detriment of others in the workplace; for example, making people feel uneasy or ashamed. The implications of this dark side are substantial. In Australia, a third of employees attribute their levels of stress to issues in the workplace (Australian Psychological Society, 2015). In the U.S., one

third of employees experience chronic stress at work, with a quarter attributing the stress to supervisors and co-workers (American Psychological Association & Harris Interactive, 2016).

Within the abundance of research investigating negative workplace behaviours (for review see Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014), there are examples of behaviour that could be classified as EM. For example, two sample items from the widely cited Workplace Incivility Scale, (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), are 'making demeaning remarks' and 'putting people down'. It is probable that a subset of well-researched counter-productive work practices are operational of EM, therefore investigating the nature of EM at work may inform development of sensitive approaches to manage conflict that may take into account employees with deceptive personality characteristics. Initial empirical evidence has shown that employees perceive manipulative behaviours to be present in the workplace (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017). In that study, teachers were asked to measure their school principal's willingness to manipulate. Teachers who perceived being manipulated in a negative manner also self-reported higher levels of negative affect. It is clear that investigating willingness to EM in the workplace warrants further attention.

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1.1. Operationalising emotional manipulation: willing and able to manipulate at work

There is some uncertainty about whether people who have the ability to manipulate others are willing to actually engage in EM (Hyde & Grieve, 2014), perhaps due to their ethical principles (Grieve & Mahar, 2010) or agreeableness (O'Connor & Athota, 2013). Hyde and Grieve (2014) therefore refined items from Austin et al. (2007) to delineate one's willingness to manipulate from one's ability, by asking participants how often they behaved in emotionally manipulative ways ('How often have you tried to make someone feel uneasy?'), rather than their ability to emotionally manipulate others ('I know how to make another person feel uneasy').

The use of the willingness paradigm overcomes the limitations of asking people to self-report on an ability (Hyde & Grieve, 2014). However, the existing willingness items are not context specific. To measure EM in daily life and at work in the current study, participants were instructed to consider 'How often do you engage in each of the following in your daily life' and respond accordingly on each item. Then, to include explicit identification of the workplace, participants were asked to respond to the same items again, however, with the instructions 'How often do you engage in each of the following AT WORK'.

1.2. Research aims

Using the existing EM willingness items (Hyde & Grieve, 2014) as well as newly developed items assessing EM willingness at work, this study's primary aim was to assess an individual's willingness to manipulate others at work and in their day-to-day life. A factor analysis of the items would provide insight into the stability of the behaviour across contexts. If items load on to a single factor, it could be inferred that context does not affect willingness to manipulate, suggesting EM acts more as a personality trait. On the other hand, a contextual influence on the behaviour could be inferred if the items split between work and life in general. Due to the exploratory nature of this aim, specific predictions were not made.

The second aim of the study was to test the factor structure of Trait EM Willingness in General and at Work scale which emerged from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). As EM has previously been shown to differ as a function of sex (e.g. Grieve & Panebianco, 2013), separate CFAs were conducted for males and females. Again due to the exploratory nature of this study, no hypotheses were formulated.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Australian employees ($N = 567$; 365 females, 199 males, 3 other) participated. The mean sample age was 29.12 years ($SD = 12.72$). Percentages of participants within each age group were as follows: 18–29 (62.2%), 30–39 (15.5%), 40–64 (20.6%) and over 65 (1.1%). Individuals reported working full time ($n = 145$), part time (144), casual (237), and other (41) with one third of the sample identifying as managers. Participants included members of the general population ($n = 118$), undergraduate students employed while studying ($n = 383$), and 66 Australian microworkers. Microworkers are a demographically diverse group that provide valid psychological data (Crone & Williams, 2017).

2.2. Analytical approach

The dataset was randomly split for inclusion in either the EFA or the CFA, analysed with SPSS v23 and AMOS v23. First, the EFA was conducted on the items of the Trait EM Willingness in General and at Work scale. Factors were labelled based on item loadings.

Second, CFA tested the stability of the factor structure emerging from the EFA. Factors were initially set to correlate prior to model refinement. In step 2, items loading < 0.60 on to a factor were considered redundant and removed. In step 3, error terms with covariances larger than 20 were covaried. Factor validity was tested for gender variations. For each step, model fitness was assessed using chi-square/df, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Standard root-mean-square residual (SRMR), and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA).

After evaluating the model fit, construct reliability (CR) for convergent validity and average variance extracted (AVE) and maximum shared value (MSV) for discriminant validity was calculated (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The reliability of items in each factor was examined using Cronbach's α .

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Trait EM Willingness in General and at Work

Everyday EM willingness was measured using Hyde and Grieve's (2014) adaptation of Austin et al.'s (2007) 10-item scale. A sample item is 'In general, how often do you embarrass someone to stop them behaving in a particular way?' with participants indicating the frequency on a five point scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Now and then, 3 = Monthly, 4 = Weekly, and 5 = Daily. Internal reliability was good for the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$), consistent with previous findings (Hyde & Grieve, 2014).

Participants then completed a modified version of the everyday EM willingness scale, assessing their willingness to manipulate others at work. A sample item is 'At work, how often do you reassure people so that they are more likely to go along with what you say?' Internal reliability of the scale was very good in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

2.4. Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval, participants were recruited through posts on social networking and research participation sites, weekly emailed bulletins from the University Alumni, and lecture announcements. The survey was online and anonymous.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Between 0.5 and 5% of participants reported daily use of some forms of EM in both contexts. Between 1 and 17% of participants reported weekly use of various types of EM in daily life, compared with one and 11% at work. The majority of participants reported manipulating others 'never' or 'now and then'. The mean scores on EM behaviours indicated that both sexes manipulate more in general than at work, and that males manipulate more than females across the majority of the items (please see Supplementary material for frequency and mean comparison tables). There was no effect of job status (e.g., part-time vs. full-time) on manipulative behaviours $F(7) = 1.393$, $p = 0.205$. Managers were more likely to manipulate others at work $t(565) = 3.605$, $p < 0.001$.

3.2. Exploratory factor analysis

An EFA (maximum likelihood) was conducted ($n = 306$; 200 females, 105 males, 1 other). The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure indicated that the data were appropriate for factor analysis (0.873). Bartlett's test of sphericity revealed that the correlations between items were sufficiently high, $\chi^2(190) = 3450.11$, $p < 0.001$. The scree plot suggested three or four factors above the elbow, and four Eigenvalues were above 1. Both three- and four-factor solutions were attempted, with the three-factor solution revealing a more parsimonious result. Three factors were

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