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**INFORMATION AND MANIPULATIVE TECHNOLOGIES
IMPLEMENTED UNDER THE GUISE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSISTANCE**

Ivan L. Tretyakov (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, Politekhnikeskaya 29, Saint Petersburg, 195251, Russia,
mail@tretyakov.su

Abstract

Many criminals tend to manipulate people who surround them for the purpose of obtaining illicit profits or benefits, while recognition of such hidden criminal impacts on human psyche is traditionally considered to be the eternal problem of the human race. The higher level of informatization, the growing popularity of online communications, and the fundamentally new opportunities for personal growth, for improving living standards, and the development of intensive training methods create the illusion of an honest, open and safe dialogue with participants in the global network community. Most people have no idea about the possible cyber threats when they participate in thematic forums on such issues as the extreme expansion of consciousness, self-affirmation, and self-expression. The Article addresses the issues related to the analysis of criminal manipulations (especially of self-serving and mercenary-violent orientation) performed under the guise of psychological assistance, such as personal development training, psychotherapeutic activity, behavior correction, etc. The Author pays special attention to specific methods of committing criminal offenses and the underlying mechanisms of such offenses. The Article describes socially virulent and traumatic to psyche consequences of such information manipulative technologies and analyzes them to reveal the aims and objectives of the criminals. The Article summarized the materials of complex judicial psychological and psychiatric examinations, together with those of investigative and judicial practice; 20 relevant criminal cases examined by the Courts of the Russian Federation being studied, which undoubtedly confirms the relevance and practical significance of the issues in question.

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Keywords: Information and psychological impacts, manipulation, trainings.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The role and place of manipulation in public life

Social (especially, socio-psychological, interpersonal) relationships are heavily influenced by manipulative activities, and we can hardly overestimate their significance (Sachse & von Franqué, 2019). Presently, all spheres of the information society are literally permeated by such manipulative influences (impacts), and this is a universally accepted fact rather than fantasies of the conspiracy theorists (Bienvenue, 2020; Susser et al., 2019; Zarsky, 2019). Manipulative phenomena are seriously promoted: the fake mindset, blurred moral boundaries, absence of shame/responsibility, and the lack of moral obligations, which is quite characteristic of many media personalities such as fake (the phenomenon that became a symbol of the late postmodernism) being totally incompatible with either critical analysis, or reinterpretation of what is happening around. Those who create such fake news intentionally ignore any objective facts, or the true state of affairs. The nature of fakes is highly manipulative. After proper handling and treatment such unreliable information would turn into an ideally optimized content with its structural integrity, multifunctionality, and ambiguity of interpretations (Golovatskaya, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). It is worth noting that the reversal of post-industrial era semantic paradigms has affected the specificity of people criminalization. Presently, hacker attacks and various offenses are committed worldwide every minute with IT technologies (Cheng et al., 2020; Koziarski & Lee, 2020; Markova, 2020). While the extremist or terrorist resorts to covert, hidden manipulative impacts or to overt calls (propagandizing his/her views), the white-collar or privileged crimes are normally far from explicit manipulation of the individual and public consciousness (Cullen et al., 2019; Dearden, 2019; Hassan & Shah, 2019). Although, we can also see some resonance exceptions, for example, the financial pyramids. Those who develop and implement fraudulent schemes under the guise of psychological services, forums, educational and psychotherapeutic programs, webinars, rehabilitation training, and counselling occupy a special place in the criminological typologies and classifications. Primarily, these are professional criminals with evident experience in psychology, psychiatry and/or teaching practice; furthermore, they are driven by their exorbitant vanity, selfishness, arrogance, rather than by profit motives, seeking to dominate, dictate their will, to rule the fates of other people.

For example, on November 8, 2018, the Court found Mr. Olga Markelova, a resident of St. Petersburg (a psychologist), guilty of setting up an organization that infringed on the personality and rights of citizens. One year before that, the District Court ordered liquidation of Zeora Training Center, which had been working for five years and belonged to the Markelov family, on the grounds of the fact that its activity was not socially oriented and presented a real threat to the life and health of the clients. The experts found that such personal development trainings were overtly manipulative for the consciousness of the clients.

The provocative techniques designed to shock the person, to block any attempts of confronting a coach, and maintaining self-preservation, which ultimately aim at hacking all levels of personal control and protection were found to dominate the structure of training (training sessions). The extreme (emergency) overloading of sensory systems, which a coach achieves with severe individual and/or group pressing, leads normally to mass hysterical psychotic reactions with short-term hallucinatory paranoid symptoms. The witnesses report that they unexpectedly get absolutely frantic on the third/fourth day of

practice. Everything that happens around loses reality and seems to be kind of bright dramatization with hyperbolized horror or euphoria. At the peak of excitement, some participants tear their clothes, others are crying and sobbing, rushing around the hall or falling into a fit of convulsions. According to the victims they experienced visual hallucinations, images, etc., related to their childhood, various traumatic situations, or some emotionally significant events. Such psychotic outburst was followed by a stupor, deep sleep, depression, or disorientation. The important fact is that after such outbursts, the victims became much more sensitive to the manipulative impacts.

Two clients committed suicide, and more than ten turned for help to a psychiatrist as a result of destructive interventions of the coaches; even after the said training center ceased its activity a lot of its former clients kept on complaining of depression, suicidal mood and activity, and spontaneous auto-aggression. The investigators failed to find *Corpus delicti*, although its signs of cause were quite evident. It may also be of interest that the clients were asked to bring their friends and relatives with them to the training course and sign the waivers of claims (especially if their mental states were getting worse).

An extremist, destructive sect called the Order of the Way had been operating in Se. Petersburg under the disguise of the Center for Psycho-training and Personal Development (known as the Workshop of Intentions). Apart from generally accepted methods (in form of short-term classes related to rational, family, etc. psychotherapy, and the transactional analysis), the organizers of the Center used some psychotropic drugs that drove their clients into a state of a drug hypnosis. Within a month, they managed to block higher cognitive functions of victims and activate their lowest instincts. The members of the sect corresponded with thousands of recipients, answered their questions, giving their pieces of advice, and doing their best to get prospective victims involved into to the training practice. The common feature of all subscribers was their taste and passion for extrasensory phenomena and esotericism. The criminals set up several interactive, multi-user websites posting by themselves (on behalf of allegedly grateful customers) the enthusiastic reports. Continuously updated pages on the social networks contributed seriously to higher prestige of the Center. Moreover, the criminals simulated the activities of the most famous Internet sites located on the most reputable social services. In February 2020, the leaders and the most active protagonists of the sect were arrested and indicted on multiple counts of the Criminal Code.

The analysis of some scientific publications, sociological studies, materials of judicial and investigative practice reveals a kind of a paradoxical perception (mindset selectivity, emotional intelligence), inherent to a significant part of the population. Which means that for the most part, such people are quite able to recognize lies, manipulative techniques of journalists and politicians, however under certain circumstances, the very same people can easily become victims of various criminal manipulators (members of organized criminal groups; loner adventurers), mentally ill, who fancy themselves spiritual mentors, gurus, being quite sane and capable, but possessing the gift of persuasion, artistic abilities, and leadership skills.

1.2. Manipulative algorithms, which fraudsters use under the guise of psychological work with clients

Practical experience of law enforcement officers reveals that today's fraudsters tend to use actively the manipulative techniques known from ancient times. Such techniques proved to be efficient for both live communication and in the realm of virtual reality (Williams & Muir, 2019).

Women, old people, children, constantly anxious ones, the depressed, the alienated, and those having an innate or acquired martyr complex (i.e. with victim qualities) are known to be most amenable to manipulation and suggestion (Mayorov & Yaremenko, 2019; Wilks et al., 2019). The prospective victims on their own accord come to visit pseudo-psychologists (or officially accredited psychologists who have turned to a life of crime). The victims are normally lured by the publicity stunts like enthusiastic reviews on social networks, information on allegedly unique technologies, rumors about the international recognition of such organization, or high professionalism and charisma of their employees. The potential customers are undoubtedly seriously impressed by the first free trial sessions, where they can see high-quality printed materials with biographical reports of Hollywood stars, and pop idols, who allegedly participated in such trainings and were able to expand the boundaries of their capabilities, and knowledge, leaving their competitors far behind. Such legalized structures never limit themselves to one-time service; instead they draw a client into the long-term manipulative interaction (which in fact is sheer fooling and enslaving).

Quite often we can see the formation of persistent, fairly self-contained communities and psychotherapeutic groups, the support groups isolated from any external influences, which actually are very similar to totalitarian sects (and in some cases they really are) with the strict hierarchy, ideology, and control system (Ilyuk, 2018; Li et al., 2019).

Fraudsters (pseudo-psychologists) are primarily interested in financial capabilities of a client, the real estate properties he/she possesses, his/her social status, how protected he/she is (his/her possible liaison with law enforcement officers, and/or the criminal world). Further on, when knowing his potential client better (and sometimes well before it), the perpetrators identify possible approaches to analyze his/her socio-psychological traits, thus finding the way for criminal manipulation: 1) they collect data on the premorbid history of a person, on his/her family strains, medical history, injuries, possible cases of drug addiction or alcoholism, marital status, psycho-sexual preferences, clarifying the motive hierarchy, and the general motivational orientation; 2) they analyze their present main problems, internal contradictions, pressure points, human frailty and shortcomings; 3) they choose the fastest and toughest ways of impact that would put the client into the state of panic or helplessness, trying to make client fully dependent on the coach (trainer, guru, consultant).

Gaining the client's trust is the stage of a paramount importance for a manipulator. To form the client's psychological addiction to psychotherapeutic sessions, trainings, etc., the manipulative criminals use methods of neurolinguistic programming, persuasion, suggestion, and the group pressure effect. There attackers also resort to many well-known and widespread technologies, they all (in the context of the issues in question) are aimed at having a victim lulled into complacency, disintegrating his/her cognitive functions, and achieving his/her full obedience.

Thus, with such psychological brainwashing, the mentors make their clients living in a new, controlled environment, observing some specific rituals. The clients lose any positive contacts with their former environment, with people they loved. Such unwritten rules of conduct are gradually tightened, while the instructions from a mentor become more and more imperative. The manipulator is fully aware that he must maintain his power and control over the consciousness of clients at any costs, to keep up their motivational support. When discussing the basics of manipulative influences, it seems to be pertinent to state a few keywords that would define the gist, the essence of the phenomenon, these are distortion, error, hidden submission, motivation. Moreover, the efficiency of manipulative impacts is known to depend upon the personality of the manipulator (i.e., his/her natural qualities), on how convincing he/she is (e.g., the client faces a distinguished psychologist, an intelligence officer, a founder of a modern coaching practice method, a head of a number of projects and master classes), on his/her skills to combine logical and emotional factors when talking to clients.

The materials of a criminal case found by the Author in the archive of the Court of the Leningrad Region clearly illustrate the relationship between the criminal manipulator and his victims. On August 11, 2017, a certain Mr. A.A. Alekseenko was charged with a murder by an investigator of the Petrogradsky District of city of St. Petersburg. Law enforcement officials were able to find out that over the past seven years Mr. Alekseenko held various senior positions in the State Social Service Institutions. One time he had been prosecuted for fraud (as a Deputy Director of a Social Center). Mr. Alekseenko, being responsible for rehabilitation and psychological support for the elderly and senile people, selected lonely, financially secure women with signs of incipient dementia and sought their complete submission with manipulative actions, and suggestion. The criminal controlled his customers' expenses, accepted expensive gifts from them, and illegitimately appropriated part of their pension savings. The manipulator ensured that his victims transferred funds to him voluntarily. Five years before that (i.e., prior to his arrest) Alekseenko met a certain Mrs. B., who was the patient undergoing the gerontological re-adaptation procedure. The manipulator found out that his potential victim suffered from an incurable cancer, being absolutely lonely, at the same time she owned a luxury real estate object, land, antiques, and shares of some major Russian companies. Being mentally dependent on the manipulator, the elderly Mrs. B. paid for the expenses of Alekseenko. To take possession of his victim's property, the offender persuaded her to live with him, and married her; a few days after the marriage he killed (strangled) Mrs. B., and buried her in a private plot (garden), having rumored in advance about her alleged departure to a foreign country.

This example demonstrates one of the possible ways used by criminal manipulator for a long-term exploitation of his victim. From the very start the criminal took advantage of his social status, his official position (people generally trust social workers), further on he simulated his keen interest in the fate of the elderly woman, persuading her that with group exercises, and training practice (in some cases by living together with him) her health could be improved and life expectancy extended. The manipulator acted on the cognitive components of his clients' mind, trying to evoke as many positive emotions as possible. In most cases he managed to make his victims believe that they would be able to have all their personal conflicts reconciled, their sense of loneliness cured, and all interpersonal contradictions resolved. It was the persistent age-related violations of the clients' mind, their maladaptation and disintegration that explained their credulity and pliability to criminal/psychological impacts. The materials of the criminal

case revealed that Alekseenko was known on the social networks as a unique specialist in Nordic walking, wellness exercises, holotropic breathwork, and as a highly motivating coach. In attempts to avoid his well-deserved punishment Alekseenko repeatedly changed his testimony, refuted his claims, complained of a loss of memory, and stated that he had acted in a bewildered condition. According to one of his versions, Alekseenko himself had become the victim of manipulation and intrigues of Mrs. B., and had been forced to kill her defending his honor and dignity. The experts revealed that he was prone to hysteria, having expressed epileptoid traits, as well as a tendency to embellish his own qualities, commit overtly demonstrative acts, and distort obvious facts. On the top of it Alekseenko was characterized by such traits as self-centeredness, hypocrisy, cynicism, and rancor. The court found him sane and sentenced him to a long prison term.

The specific sequence of manipulative and violent actions (considered in relation to the topic in question) is quite an important aspect of the Study. A case of the mental violence is frequently preceded by manipulations (e.g., attempts to lure the client, to make him/her interested in training practice, obtaining his/her consent to participate); sometimes the criminals complement their aggressive behavior with hidden impacts, sometimes they do both things together, but as practice shows, the attacker, more often than not, begins his training with a powerful brainstorming session than sets up the stage ready for further manipulative scenarios.

It is so called Lifespring technology, which is quite frequently used in many trainings with destructive effect on the client's psyche. Such trend originated in the United States in the second third of the last century (Haaken & Adams, 1983). Its essence is that literally from the very first days (right from the beginning of classes) the client loses orientation in the environment and his own personality, he is left with no chance to relax for a minute, forced to feel tough emotional upheaval, participate in cynical group practices, and humiliating public self-disclosures sessions. Figuratively speaking, psycho-technologists form raw material, sort of clay they need to make a Golem. Some researchers find the origins of Lifespring technology in the Dynamics of the Mind, which was the first experimental American Psychocult (appeared in 1968 and quickly banned by the authorities), while others address to G.I. Gurdjieff (a philosopher of Russian origin), who in the first quarter of the twentieth century founded the spiritual teaching called the Fourth Way, which intertwined mysticism, philosophy, and the Muslim religious traditions. G.I. Gurdjieff paid special attention to the psychological background and a set of psychophysiological exercises, which are quite similar to today's personal growth training programs. Practical courses organized by G.I. Gurdjieff and his followers were especially popular in Europe and the USA in the 20-40s (while the largest number of his supporters lived in France).

2. Problem Statement

A significant number of criminal manipulative impacts belong to the category of fraud. Such crimes are highly latent and poorly disclosed. As for the officially registered fraudulent activity, the number of such cases in the Russian Federation over the years has a tendency to increase. Resonant crimes related to deception, breach of trust, assault on life, health, citizens' rights, including some acts performed under the guise of psychological assistance, psychotherapeutic services, and social/psychological support definitely cause serious public concern.

We have to note that in 2020, with all this world coronavirus panic, people tend to turn to psychologists and psychiatrists (as well as to magicians, witches, shamans, healers, etc.) more frequently. Accordingly, we can find much more scammers, who promise to restore the lost balance, to reboot the life, to have people adapted to such new traumatic circumstances.

An integrated approach to understanding the problems of criminal manipulation with psychological technologies is still far from complete, nevertheless, knowledge of destructive information-psychological influences is constantly being replenished; today we know a lot about the scammers and the nature of their manipulative behavior, however the criteria for revealing the manipulative potential of criminal personalities still need to be clarified. A more detailed assessment of the psychological brainwashing mechanisms of victims will certainly improve our preventive measures and investigative actions.

3. Research Questions

In context of this Study we feel that solving a few issues will be of the most theoretical and practical significance.

Firstly, we have to disclose the internal content and the basic elements of manipulative impacts performed under the guise of psychological assistance, behavior correction practice, training, etc. Secondly, we need a thorough description of the socio-psychological characteristics of criminal manipulators together with their motivational orientation. Thirdly, we have to scrutinize the latent criminal impacts in order to improve the efficiency of social preventive measure and ensure comprehensive victimological security.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the Study is to examine the information, criminological and psychological characteristics of criminal manipulations performed under the guise of psychological counseling and training together with their adverse effects.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Methodological settings for this study

The scientific works, which prove the need for an integrated approach to understanding criminal manipulations from the standpoint of philosophy, psychology, sociology, law (information, criminal, etc.), as well as philology formed the methodological setting of this study. The Author used general scientific observation method, generalization, as well as a descriptive method with elements of discursive, contextual, quantitative and content analysis of texts.

5.2. Materials of investigative and judicial practice on the topic of in question – Methods of study

In studying of a total of 20 criminal cases of the category being discussed, which had been examined by the Courts of Moscow and the Moscow Region, St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region,

Krasnodar Territory (Krai), the Republic of Karelia, together with media articles, scientific publications, social network information, etc., the Author used formal-logical approach, applied the methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, generalization, systems analysis, statistical method, and comparative legal analysis.

6. Findings

Manipulative criminals conducting their psychological seminars, consultations, extreme trainings, etc. in rude and cynical manner focus the attention of each client on his/her real flaws and problems, trying to expose as much as possible the inner world of a person, who came for help. In these cases, such manipulative training aims at disorienting and disorganizing the client, creating an illusion of chaos in his/her mind, causing an impending sense of doom, helplessness, and depressive loneliness, and then, all of a sudden, the manipulator would switch up the victim's attention to offer some new fundamentally different forms of behavior, which are fully controlled by criminals.

Criminal manipulators providing psychological services in the form of trainings, consultations, etc., have very different criminal and life experience, individual and personal qualities, motivations, and the professional level (in a broad sense of the word).

The criminal behavior mechanism is normally characterized by a multitude of motivations (polymotivation); such behavior being primarily dominated by selfish and mercenary-violent motives, motives of vanity and destructive self-assertion, needs for adventures and play, psychopathological motives (e.g., criminals with schizophrenia or manic-depressive traits).

Having analyzed 20 criminal cases, we identified five distinct categories of manipulators who committed crimes related to psychological assistance, training, etc., these are 1) those with a criminal past, who set up an organized criminal group (organization) to perform a specific (specialized) criminal activity; 2) fraudsters, who opened training, rehabilitation, developing, etc. centers, whose personnel is not aware of any criminal intentions of the organizers (we have to emphasize that many services are provided on quite a legal basis); 3) psychologists and psychotherapists (including psychiatrists, drug therapists, teachers), who make use of their official position for criminal purposes; 4) members of banned totalitarian religious organizations, who misinform others and disguise themselves as the organizers of psychological/consultation centers, or clinics; 5) touring scammers, who conduct one-off manipulative events in various cities, hiding themselves behind well-known world brands (with names of prominent scientists, politicians, actors, or artists); 6) outcasts with abnormalities of psyche, mentally ill people engaged in illegal activities (they normally position themselves as psychotherapists, psychics, indigenous healers).

Those who organize criminal schemes under the guise of psychological assistance evidently possess leadership qualities, they enjoy the trust and respect of participants because they can efficiently achieve any group goal. The distinctive features of the organizers are as follows - authoritarianism, insistency, endurance, and determination. Some of them are quite secretive, but in most cases, they are of so-called mosaic nature with the dominance of hysteroid and addictive traits, which is evidently manifested in their deviant self-actualization, in various outrageous acts, and in overt narcissism (excessive self-absorption). Such criminals are always busy with improving their professional skills. At

the same time, they never trust anyone, sticking to the autonomous morality principles (which means that they live by their own rules); they never experience any torments of conscience, and are not capable of compassion, honesty, or doing any legal job.

We believe that in order to optimize the psychological assistance to the population, to protect the mental health of people of the Russian Federation, to ensure their victimological safety, and to counteract fraud (performed under the guise of extreme training, seminars, consultations, etc.) more efficiently, the state control over all organizations that provide psychological services should be strengthened; at the same time the activities of civil society institutions, and professional psychotherapeutic associations aimed at proper recognition and neutralization of destructive information/ manipulative impacts have to be revitalized.

We need to set up special legal frameworks that would as clear as possible regulate the nature, content, scope and quality of psychological services; it would ensure timely identification of dishonest specialists, false psychologists, fraudsters, etc., as well as prevent specific crimes in this area. At the same time, police officers must use more efficiently the preventive potential of the current criminal law, which clearly establishes liability for causing harm to health, deceit, mental violence, and inducing suicides.

In this light, the initiative of the Author of the article, who considers it expedient to create support groups for people who became victims of criminal manipulators, deserves special attention. Such groups (together with psychologists, psychiatrists, journalists, law enforcement officers) could conduct educational and propaganda work in the mass media, forming a solid moral/ethical counterbalance to manipulators.

7. Conclusion

Manipulative criminal technologies undermine the foundations of human civilization, which are based on trust and justice, faithfulness to the individual, and due respect for rights and freedom. Unfortunately, the contradictory dual nature of human beings is defined by both the need to manipulate others and the desire to withstand hidden impacts, which inevitably leads to conflicts. Although any consensus on this issue seems to be impossible, a need to counteract socially dangerous attempts by criminal individuals to limit or paralyze someone's will, using the victim's helplessness to achieve a criminal result, is undoubtedly evident.

With the opportunities of Internet marketing, the manipulators can maximize the visibility and recognition of their specific content in search engines. Moreover, they tend to optimize information resources (aiming at a proper balance between requests and contents of the sites), which plays a substantial role for preparation of a manipulative content.

Of all types of mercenary (as well as mercenary-violent) encroachments, destructive manipulations used by criminals under the guise of psychological training, courses, consultations, etc. appear to be the most immoral and dangerous. Actually, the victims needed real help, they experienced real problems, real difficulties, real subjectively significant troubles and trials, they, therefore, sincerely trusted the attackers, and followed their instructions. But instead, the health of the victims, their material well-being was damaged, moreover, we should not forget that such people suffered severe stress, the consequences of which will with them throughout the whole life.

Any given extreme training practice can be considered to have a pronounced manipulative/destructive orientation being organized by criminals if it shows the following elements – 1) advertising of a specific nature (high-quality, professional, and at the same time too intrusive, with logic-chopping features, and abundance of hidden psychological impacts; being too loud-mouthed with signs of elementary deception, and promises that can hardly be kept); 2) at the initial stage, the organizers never select the participants too strictly (like “only young and healthy people with no mental problems can participate”); 3) individual communication with the coach during the training session is minimized (nobody cares about customers complaints, their mood, etc.); 4) groups for training are compiled in an arbitrary order (regardless of gender, age, level of education, upbringing, life experience, etc.); at the same time, it is quite easy to identify people participating in such events for the first time, zombie fans, creating the required emotional background, and young coaches acting as ordinary clients; 5) the evidence of stereotype nature (uniformity) of psycho-traumatic methods.

With increasingly complex social situation the number of people, who really need psychological assistance is going up, at the same time, due to the expansion of information technologies, the number of criminally-manipulative interventions in the public and individual consciousness is growing too. The managerial and law enforcement bodies/agencies have to realize/analyze their previous mistakes, and shortcomings, and when implementing the anti-crime policy, pay much more attention to ensuring security in the sphere of information, to monitoring various services rendered to the population (especially those related to psychological, medical, and/or social help), as well as to interacting with the Internet community, with professional associations, and independent experts.

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