

Sex Differences in Managing and Manipulating Others' Feelings and Behaviors

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Reference:

Taylor, M.B., Meyers, A. & Barchard, K.A. (April, 2004). *Sex Differences in Managing and Manipulating Others' Feelings and Behaviors*. Poster presented at the 2004 Western Psychological Association Annual Conference, Phoenix, AZ.

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Abstract

Manipulation skill is the ability to change others' feelings and behaviors to get them to think, feel or act as desired. Barchard and Skeem (2003) created maximum-performance tests of the ability to change other people's emotions and behaviors: Changing People's Feelings (CPF) and Changing People's Behaviors (CPB). The purpose of this research is to examine sex differences on these two tests.

Manipulativeness is one aspect of Psychopathy. Psychopathy is characterized by shamelessness, superficial charm, manipulativeness, and irresponsibility (Cleckley, 1941). Men score higher than women, on average, on measures of Psychopathy (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). Therefore, men might score higher than women on measures of manipulation skill, as well. However, men and women have never been compared on maximum-performance tests of this skill.

The ability to manage other people's emotions (and perhaps their behavior) might also be seen as one aspect of an entirely different construct, Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence includes the ability to perceive, understand and manage the emotions of oneself and others. Women score slightly higher than men on some measures of Emotional Intelligence (Beisecker & Barchard, 2003). Therefore, women might score higher than men on these two new measures of manipulation skill. However, men and women have never been compared on maximum-performance tests designed specifically to assess the ability to manage others' emotions and behaviors, and which distinguish between these two abilities.

It is unclear if the CPF and CPB measure an aspect of Psychopathy, an aspect of Emotional Intelligence, or both. Therefore, it is unclear which sex should score higher on these measures.

In this study, 219 undergraduate students completed the CPF and CPB. Women scored significantly higher than men on the CPF. The difference on the CFB approached but did not reach statistical significance. These findings may be surprising to researchers in the area of Psychopathy, where men usually obtain higher scores, but not to researchers in Emotional Intelligence, where women sometimes obtain higher scores.

Further research is needed on these new tests to determine if they measure an aspect of Psychopathy, an aspect of Emotional Intelligence, or a skill that is common to both.

Introduction

Previous research has shown that men outscore women on measures of Psychopathy (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). Hare (1993) defines Psychopathy as a personality disorder associated with irresponsibility; pathological lying, manipulateness, and a lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse. Thus, one aspect of Psychopathy is the tendency to manipulate other people. As Rogers, Vitacco, Jackson, Martin, Collins and Sewell (2002) state “Psychopaths frequently con and manipulate others in and attempt to achieve their own objectives” (p. 31). However, until recently, no maximum-performance tests of the ability to manipulate others existed, and so little is known about sex differences in this skill. Previous research on psychopathy suggests that men may attempt to manipulate others more often, but no previous research has addressed the question of whether they are more successful when they do this.

In 2003, Barchard and Skeem created two new measures of manipulation skill. These two maximum-performance tests distinguish between the ability to manipulate other people’s feelings (the Changing People’s Feelings test) and the ability to manipulate other people’s behaviors (the Changing People’s Behaviors test). If manipulation skill is an aspect of Psychopathy, then men would be expected to score higher on these tests than women.

On the other hand, the CPF and CPB tests might measure an entirely different construct: Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is the ability to perceive, understand and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others. Some descriptions of Emotional Intelligence clearly include the broader area of social skills within this area (e.g., Goleman, 1995). In contrast to the research on Psychopathy, research on Emotional Intelligence has shown that women score slightly higher than men on at least some measures of this construct (Beisecker & Barchard, 2003).

Because these two new tests of manipulation skill might be interpreted as measuring aspects of either Psychopathy or Emotional Intelligence (or both), we cannot predict which sex will score higher on the CPF and CPB tests. The purpose of this study is to examine these sex differences in manipulation skill.

Method

Participants

A total of 219 undergraduate students (150 female) participated in this study in return for course credit. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 49 (mean 22.5, S.D. 6.2). The majority of the participants indicated their ethnicity to be White (58%), Asian (15%), Black (10%), Hispanic (9%) or Native (.5%).

Stimuli

Changing People’s Feelings (Barchard & Skeem, 2003a). This test consists of eight different scenarios describing the relationship between two people. The first person in each scenario could respond in five different ways. The participant rates how effective each response would be in changing the feelings of the other person, using a Likert-type scale where 1 signifies that the response was “Very Effective” and 5 signifies that the response was “Very Ineffective”.

Changing People’s Behaviors (Barchard & Skeem, 2003b). This test consists of 11 different scenarios describing the relationship between two people. The first person in each scenario could respond in five different ways. The participant rates how effective each response would be in changing the behaviors of the other person, using a Likert-type scale where 1 signifies that the response was “Very Effective” and 5 signifies that the response was “Very Ineffective”.

Procedures

Participants completed these measures in two one-hour sessions conducted one week apart. The tests were administered on the computer under the supervision of a trained research assistant.

Results

We compared men's and women's scores on the CPF and CPB tests. There was a significant difference between men's and women's ability to change the feelings of others ($t(217) = -2.36, p = .019$). Women scored higher than men (women's mean = 5.8, men's mean = 2.4). In contrast, there was no significant difference between the scores of men and women on the Changing People's Behaviors measure ($t(217) = -1.895, p = .059$), although women's scores were still slightly higher than men's (women's mean = 8.8, men's mean = 5.4).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between a person's sex and their ability to manipulate the feelings and behaviors of others. A significant difference in the average scores of men and women was found on the Changing People's Feelings (CPF) test (Barchard & Skeem, 2003a): Women scored higher than men. Women also scored slightly higher than men on the Changing People's Behaviors (CPB) test (Barchard & Skeem, 2003b), although that difference did not reach statistical significance. These findings may be surprising to some researchers because men on average score higher than women on measures of Psychopathy (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). On the other hand, the CPF and CPB tests might be better thought of as measures of Emotional Intelligence, and women do score higher than men on some measures in that area (Beisecker & Barchard, 2003). Further research is needed to determine if manipulation skill is best thought of as an aspect of Psychopathy, an aspect of Emotional Intelligence, or a skill that is common to both.

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