Understanding and Dealing with Controlling, Intimidating and Manipulative Personalities

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To Paul, a very special person and brother
1957–2010

Preface

People have always been interested in human psychology and how we do what we do and more importantly why we do what we do. Over the past ten years there have been numerous books published about dark psychology, manipulation and control, narcissistic abuse and other related titles.

In my nearly 30-plus years of studying psychology in general, but more specifically at the more sinister aspects of our psychology, especially around controlling, intimidating and manipulative behaviour, I have often been taken aback by how many people I talk to that have been touched in some way by this type of behaviour. Be it at home, in an intimate relationship, in the wider family, in the workplace or just within their wider social circle. Many have stories to tell about the impact of these behaviours and the disorientation in themselves this has caused and, in turn, the turmoil in many of their relationships.

In my therapy practice I see many "targets" of these dark behaviours and the impact the behaviour has. I previously used the term "victims" but was introduced to the term "targets" by a participant in one of my CIM trainings. I liked and preferred this term as it suggests less of succumbing and more of having been played in a way that was very much out of our control and could happen to anyone in any situation given the right individual: a CIM individual (Controlling, Intimidating and Manipulative personality):—a term I will use throughout this book.

Many books on the subject either are brief and light on detail or have too much of an academic bias with less practical skills for the reader to take away. With this in mind the intention of this book is twofold.

- To increase **awareness** of this type of behaviour and the impact it has on all of us.
- To build **confidence** to manage this behaviour and enable the reader to move on from controlling behaviours they, or others, may be encountering and trying to deal with.

> People are rarely who they seem to be on the outside to the casual observer. Lurking beneath their polite, affable exterior can be a potentially dark, shadow side consisting of insecurities and aggressive, selfish impulses repressed and carefully hidden from public view. (Greene 2020, p. 133)

One of the most popular words for 2022 was the term "Gaslighting." In this age of misinformation of "fake news," conspiracy theories, Twitter trolls, and deep fakes—*gaslighting* has emerged as a word for our time. A driver of disorientation and mistrust, *gaslighting* is "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone especially for one's own advantage." The year 2022 saw a 1740% increase in searches for *gaslighting*, with high interest throughout the year.

Another popular word for that year was—Mercurial: someone who is charismatic and clever but roguish or prone to quick changes in mood. Mercurial is something that relates well to the CIM personality and the way they work. We will consider the many aspects of gaslighting and what has come to be known as the dark side of personality.

In addition to seeing CIM behaviour in all its forms through my therapeutic practice, I have also worked with CIMs, socialised with them, and managed them in various work roles over the years. I have also, like so many people, been played. This often surprises people who attend my workshops as they believe that with all that I know about this subject I could never be a target. If only that were true! I am always highlighting the skill of a CIM and the fact we can all be targets.

As we delve into these challenging and manipulative personalities one thing should be made clear from the start: no matter how aware you are, and how good you think you are at dealing with people in these categories, anyone and everyone can be played. The key thing to appreciate is that with greater awareness and confidence the potential damage these individuals can wreak can be significantly minimised and managed.

So welcome to the start of this journey and I hope you find it as useful and insightful as those who have, over many years, attended my programmes on these subjects.

Nottingham, UK   Martin J Smith

Reference

Greene, Robert, The Concise Laws of Human Nature, The 48 Laws of Power. Profile Books, 2020.

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About the Author

Photo courtesy of Paul Ives Photography

Martin J Smith, PhD is a senior lecturer in the social sciences at Nottingham Trent University and an independent training consultant. He specialises in extreme difficult behaviour and personality issues which go well beyond simply awkward and often highly controlling, intimidating and manipulative. He has over thirty years of training experience in communication, interpersonal skills and conflict management. He is also a psychotherapist specialising in the treatment of anxiety, depression, stress, phobias and posttraumatic stress disorders. Presenting and advising directly to a range of organisations on an issue that not only causes difficulties but drains the very life out of teams and people at all levels, he also presents to a variety of Public and Private Organisations both here in the UK and in the United States of America. Martin designs and writes training programmes for individuals and groups and develops personal coaching strategies. He has had the unique opportunity to work and deal with a vast range of situations which require the skills he teaches. These include minor staff issues in a team, through to the most violent, disturbing and psychologically stressful and challenging situations in mainstream society. He has written for a number of UK and US magazines and has designed and taught training packages in various private and public sector organisations. He is a life member of the *Open University Psychological Society* and a senior accredited member of the *British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and the National Counselling and Psychotherapy*

Society where he is an accredited trainer delivering a range of CPD events including his unique CIM programme.

He holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Psychotherapy working from solution focused and brief therapy methods. He has a Bachelor's degree in Psychotherapy with specific focus on clinical hypnosis and a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. He is a past member of the prestigious *Institute for Leadership and Management (ILM) and the Chartered Management Institute (CMI)* as well as a member of *the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA) and Association of Contextual Behavioural Sciences (ACBS).* As a serving police officer for 25 years he has had opportunity in various roles to both experience and manage the types of personality he highlights in this book. As a senior police officer, he has been trained in hostage negotiation skills and critical incident management all of which have helped develop greater understanding of human personalities.His overall original interest in human conflict, physical confrontation and aggression led to an interest in Psychology in general and more specially to psychotherapy and various aspects of clinical work.If you would like any further information on any of the ITC programmes or details on personal coaching/therapy sessions you can call Martin on **07 973 410 010** or email him at **martin@taking-control.co.uk**

Acronyms/Abbreviations[1]

ACBS   Association of Contextual Behavioural Sciences
ACT   Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
BACP   British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy
BFI   The Big Five Inventory
CIM   Controlling Intimidating and Manipulative Personality
CMI   Chartered Management Institute
DSM   Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
DT   Dark Triad or Dark Tetrad
EDB   Extreme Difficult Behaviour
EQ   Emotional Intelligence
FFM   Five Factor Model of Personality Domains
HEXACO   Acronym for the Six Factor Model
ICD   International Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders
ILEETA   International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association
ILM   Institute for Leadership and Management
IQ   Intelligence Quotient
OCEAN   Acronym for the Five Factor Model
OUPS   Open University Psychological Society
NCPS   National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society
NLP   Neuro Linguistic Programming
TCI   The Temperament and Character Inventory
UPC   Unreasonable Persistent Complainant

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[1] A number of acronyms and abbreviations are used throughout the text and the following is a brief guide to the various terms used and the abbreviations relevant to each term.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Once Upon a Time in Nottingham

The title may sound like a Quentin Tarantino film but it is quite an apt heading as I look back on the increased interest in aspects of controlling and manipulative behaviour. What started out as a look at a small group of people who could be classed as extremely difficult in the workplace has, over the years, taken on a life of its own, and has, I hope, had a very positive impact for many who have attended the various training programmes I have developed and delivered on these subjects.

As far back as 2001 I was delivering a programme through a local government training group on dealing with unreasonable persistent complainants. This highly successful programme ran for over ten years to numerous local authorities that were trying to manage customers and service users who proved to be completely unreasonable in their dealings with the authority.

The unreasonable persistent complainant was considered a person who put unnecessary pressure on an authority and would take up too much time and resources. The programme was a considerable success, and I was, as I would later be with the EDB Programme (Extreme Difficult Behaviour), surprised at how many individuals were out there causing so much upset. The work I did with the training group resulted in me delivering programmes to the local authority ombudsman's offices and helping with input into a draft policy created to help authorities manage this type of behaviour.

Fast forward to 2011 and a request arrived from the Director of ACAS Nottingham to run a programme on very difficult people. Essentially this focused on those people who went beyond the difficult and awkward and would eventually be classed as extreme difficult and persistent or more simply put "the downright impossible". Like the unreasonable persistent complainant, or UPC programme, this programme would help address that individual who took up an inordinate amount of time for managers, HR and senior management teams within organisations.

Initially the programme was set to run for a couple of sessions at the Nottingham office and I firmly believed that the programme would then simply fizzle out. After all these types of people, with these types of behaviour, were few and far between.

Or so we thought. Very much like the thoughts about UPC's it proved to be very wrong.

After a few sessions the ACAS office at Leeds and then Newcastle expressed interest in the programme. This was followed by sessions for Bristol, Manchester, Wales and the East of England. Within a year I was delivering the EDB programme to all ten regions of ACAS from Bristol to Glasgow and London to Cardiff. As well as open courses there were many in-house sessions for various individual organisations.

Another surprise of this programme was who was attending and from where. The idea that this type of problem behaviour was restricted to any particular group, organisation, or sector was quickly dispelled as organisations in the public, private and voluntary sector were all represented.

Over the years, and over hundreds of training sessions with many organisations, it became clear that the behaviour and processes of the EDB was virtually the same in all settings. I have speculated over the years why this might be, and one thing stands out; we are dealing with people, and specific personality traits that have no occupational, career, social or family boundaries. This is one reason strongly referencing personality and behaviour in the programme—regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, all EDB's display certain behaviours that make them extremely difficult to deal with.

Some examples of these traits are broadly set around, for example individuals who:

• Believe they are always right and never wrong.
• Will often see themselves as the victim and never see any other perspective on an issue and nearly always claim that any problem is someone else's fault.
• Will not accept a decision or ruling from anyone and will continue to argue or push for recognition that they are right.
• They make things personal and blocks efforts to resolve issues.
• Have no insight into the affect of their actions or behaviour on others.

I always start the first module of the EDB or UPC programme with a list like this and see many attendees nod in agreement and often, after just half an hour comment on how well I am describing an EDB in their organisation. This has followed on with the latest programme and the main focus of this book, those individuals who are controlling, intimidating and manipulative personality. Why do so many say that the programme and descriptions seem to talk directly to them? The reason for this is simple, all CIM / EDB individuals follow a predictable process and line of behaviour, the content of an issue, and the organisation or setting may differ but the behaviours, reactions and responses are often the same.

Many have asked if I get bored delivering these programmes over so many years and so many times. My answer is always no, because I am both amazed at what a CIM or EDB does and how they operate. I am pleased with the amount of positive feedback from those who attend the programmes and go away with greater awareness and confidence that something can be done to deal with those that go beyond the difficult and who are often as stated earlier, seen as the "downright impossible"

There are no easy answers. I have a humorous comment I always make about any-one who tells you they have the simple and perfect answer to managing these individuals. I will say if you have someone who does say this to you then you need to ask them two very relevant questions.

1. What medication are they taking for delusional tendencies?
2. Have they actually ever worked, lived or dealt with one of these individuals in any setting?

My tongue in cheek remark points to the fact that there is no simple and easy answer to this behaviour and no simple effective technique which works all the time with everyone. There ARE skills and approaches that can be developed to help gain control of what may often seem like an impossible problem.

From the UPC and EDB programmes came a general interest and continued request for a programme that examined the problem more generically to consider the wider implications for those trying to deal with this type of behaviour—not just in the work place but in the family, in social settings and relationships. This took my work on this subject in different directions and an overall look at the darker side of personality.

In this book we will look at a whole range of behaviours and personalities and address concepts and ideas around controlling, intimidating and manipulative personalities which have come more into mainstream thinking and concern for many people. Terms such as "Gaslighting" and "The Dark Triad" are now quite common-place. With this comes a benefit of bringing this type of behaviour more into the general public consciousness. It also however highlights the negative aspects in that what is written about such terms and the increase in what can sometimes be more "pop psychology" and general sensationalising of issues. We should look to court greater respect of this subject due to the damage they can cause people.

I do not wish to critique anyone's personal experience in trying to deal with darker personalities but sometimes, as I have found with therapy styles, people can become fixed on a way that has worked for one individual in one setting but may not be more broadly applied across a wider range of contexts.

The focus of this book is to look at a wide spectrum of issues that lead to this behaviour and then offer a range of techniques and approaches from leading author-ities and researchers that offer the reader a menu of options and greater and deeper understanding of the issues. Two key aims for this book is to (1) help raise aware-ness of the types of negative behaviour that can so damage many people and (2) give confidence to be able to recognise and manage this behaviour.

There is a group of people whose behaviour and personality traits can affect everyone around them. These are individuals who cause a proportionately higher percentage of difficulties and issues for organisations and everyone they come into contact with. People I have been termed in this programme as—Controlling, Intimidating and Manipulative Personalities**—or CIM's**—they cause headaches and upset at work, home and social settings. In their eyes they are never wrong, they are always professional, and others are very unprofessional. Dealing with CIM

personalities requires a particular and specific approach to other forms of interpersonal skills.

1.1   Sample Case Study: Introducing CIM

I shall use a number of small case studies or vignettes in this book to illustrate various aspects of the darker personality types, drawing particularly from the Dark Triad model (Paulhus and Williams 2002). But before we get started it might be useful to look at an initial case study illustrating the more general type of personality we are talking about and hence introduce you to the CIM. Unfortunately, as you read this little introductory case study it will perhaps be all to familiar reading and you are easily able to relate to the behaviours and interactions we will be talking about. In a way this can be heartening because, as many who attend the CIM Programme say, they are pleased, in a strange way, that others can also relate to the behaviours described and therefore recognise, that they are not alone in experiencing this problem—it is not just them.

The CIM I would like to introduce to you now is a person of undetermined age, and of an undetermined gender, sexual orientation, religious and cultural background and even socio-economic background. They are of an undetermined schooling or academic background and, in essence, are an individual of the World. Many ask me if there is a particular "type" or "profile" of a CIM and as I highlight so far I have found this type of behaviour in a range of people across age, gender, ethnicity and any other grouping you care to put people into.

They are a very interesting and definitely challenging type of personality that, in work, family and social environments present behaviours that can have a significant and often very negative and damaging impact on those around them and who they come into contact with.

The CIM must be right! In an argument or discussion, they will put forward their view and either override or ignore anyone else's feelings or thoughts on a matter. They often have a very negative attitude to many things and dealing with them can be hard work. The World is against them, and they are often (in their eyes) the victim of a range of negative attitudes and behaviours that others are often baffled by and unable to see or appreciate. Others may try to do their very best to placate, support and help the CIM. Despite such efforts to do the right thing it is never good enough and if you do try to help you often become the direct target of blame. You have caused the CIM's problem, and it is you who have hurt them, let them down and not been there for them.

Their take on an event or interaction is very interesting. When you speak about what has been agreed or a way forward with an issue or problem, they outright state that was not what happened or discussed. They have an uncanny and incredible skill to get you to question yourself about what happened, with the result that you either become doubtful or completely confused. When you raise concerns with others, family or work managers for instance you are faced with disbelief as others say the

CIM is fine and "a very nice, polite and charming person". At this stage there may be a strong desire to shout or even scream and others and say "Can you not see what is happening here?". "Can you not see what this person is doing?" The reality of course, if you took time to step back at this point, that others cannot see what is happening because the CIM is very clever at creating a good impression.

If you notice another person, a close friend, or work colleague being controlled, intimidated, or manipulated you may struggle to get them to see what is actually happening. Trying to tell them what is happening is met with comments like "You just don't understand them" or worse "They told me you did not like them and this is just clear evidence you have it in for them, you should be ashamed of yourself", and trying to get the CIM to see what they are doing is another waste of time since they will question you on why you feel that way and think such bad things. The more you push, the more you may feel frustrated, angry, annoyed, humiliated or even downright sick.

As I often like to say in the CIM Programme, this is not a difficult person, nor an unreasonable person. This is an impossible person who, in their mind (and only in their mind) is completely reasonable. You cannot change this person, nor even understand this person, but I firmly believe, and will show you in this book—you can manage this person!

References[1]

Journal Articles

Paulhus, Delroy, Williams, Kevin (2002) The Dark Triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, Journal of Research in Personality, Volume 36, Issue 6, 2002.

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[1] The following are books, journal articles and web-based articles which the reader may find beneficial and give further detail to many of the ideas, theories and strategies outlined in this book.

Chapter 2
Listening to the Alarm Bells

Check for updates

2.1 Introduction

We are going to look in some detail at the various manifestations of controlling, intimidating and manipulative personalities, or CIM personalities, which will be the main term we will use throughout the text. The aim is to look at this behaviour in many settings. This type of behaviour surfaces in all areas of life—be it work, family, friends or social settings, the basis of this behaviour and its outcomes and impact on people is fairly consistent. Psychologist Alan Godwin makes the point that these people will do three things to you if you let them, these being that:

"They will make you sick—They will wear you out—They will drive you crazy" (Godwin 2014). He goes on to state "Conflict with unreasonable people goes well only when we first know and understand what we're up against" (Godwin 2018). We are going to look carefully and fully at the CIM personality to provide a comprehensive picture of what you are up against. Before we do that, we need to look at one issue which crops up so often and that is the fact that we unconsciously sense something is wrong but often do not act on this. Why is this?

We need to start by looking at what is going on and to know what we are looking at. If we are not aware of the problem behaviour, we will struggle to even get started on managing this type of behaviour. Gavin De Becker in his excellent book, the Gift of Fear (DeBecker 1998) highlights the positives of fear and why, when the alarm bell goes off in our head we should listen to it. The problem is that the intuitive voice in our head that notes there is something wrong is so often ignored. Although we should not overreact to things and see CIM behaviours and personalities everywhere we look, we should be on our guard because unfortunately we can easily miss the times when we are being controlled, intimidated, or manipulated.

We will explore how CIM's do what they do, and how we can manage them more effectively and recognise more easily their tactics and approaches. An important