



Relationship between interparental functioning and adolescents' level of Machiavellianism: A multi-perspective approach



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ABSTRACT

Childrearing antecedents of Machiavellianism have been investigated, finding that cold, rejecting, and neglecting parenting is associated with Machiavellianism. However, there is a paucity of research on Machiavellianism and family functioning that is suggested to be a stronger predictor of children's adjustment than parenting. In two cross-sectional, self-report studies with 266 adolescents (115 boys) and 98 families raising adolescents (51 boys), we investigated the relationship between adolescent Machiavellianism and interparental functioning. We found that some aspects of perceived interparental conflict and poor quality coparenting were associated with higher levels of Machiavellianism in boys. The association between interparental discord and Machiavellianism has been discussed with respect to previous studies on family functioning, child maladjustment, and Machiavellianism. The selective relationship between measured indices of interparental functioning and Machiavellianism in boys has been discussed using the male vulnerability hypothesis and the distinct pathways model.

1. Introduction

Machiavellianism – a personality trait representing cynical, manipulative, and detached interpersonal attitudes and world views – has been in the focus of authors from several fields of psychology since the 1970s (for a review see Fehr, Samson, & Paulhus, 1992). However, research on the developmental aspects of Machiavellianism has been scarce. Developmental research on Machiavellianism focused mostly on parent-child interactions (e.g., Kraut & Price, 1976; Láng & Birkás, 2015; Ojha, 2007) and general family processes (e.g., Láng, 2016a; Láng & Birkás, 2014). Although these studies provided valuable data on the developmental antecedents of Machiavellianism, the investigation of interparental discord – an important correlate of child and adolescent maladjustment (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997; Cummings & Davies, 1994) – has been out of the scope of these studies, yet. This paper presents two studies that were aimed at investigating the relationship between adolescents' level of Machiavellianism and quality of parents' dyadic functioning.

1.1. Developmental antecedents of Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is a personality trait characterized by manipulative and deceitful interpersonal tactics, a cynical view of the world

and fellow humans, and pragmatic moral norms (Christie & Geis, 1970). Behavioral genetic studies showed that environmental factors (Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011) and especially shared environmental factors (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008) accounted for a significant part of between-subject variance in Machiavellianism. Thus, experiences in the family of origin might be especially formative for the development of Machiavellianism. Despite this, few studies have focused on the empirical investigation of the relationship between childhood experiences and Machiavellian personality traits – either longitudinally or with a cross-sectional methodology.

In an early research, Kraut and Price (1976) found that manipulative children have parents who also show high levels of Machiavellianism. Besides replicating the above mentioned results, a recent study on the relationship between Machiavellianism of grown-up children and their parents showed that the strength of this association weakened as children grew older (Sivy-Hudowska & Pilch, 2014). We consider this result to be an argument for environmental effects in the transgenerational transmission of Machiavellianism.

Parenting and family functioning have been found to be linked to Machiavellianism in adolescents and adults as well. In several studies (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014; Kraut & Price, 1976; Láng & Birkás, 2015; Ojha, 2007), Machiavellianism was significantly associated with recollections or concurrent perceptions of parental

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rejection. Láng and Lénárd (2015) showed that Machiavellianism was related to more frequent recollections of childhood negative home atmosphere and neglect in a community sample of adults. These experiences of neglect might be reflected in Machiavellian adolescents' possession of schemas that express expectations of emotional deprivation, mistrust, and abuse (Láng, 2015a).

Studies from a family systems perspective (Láng & Birkás, 2014; Ryumshina, 2013) found that adolescents' perception and teachers' report of family disengagement had a significant and positive correlation with Machiavellianism. The study of Láng and Birkás (2014) showed that Machiavellian adolescents' families were characterized by chaotic family functioning as well. As an extension, Láng (2016a) reported that adults' retrospective account of emotional parentification [i.e., crediting the child with responsibility for the emotional well-being of parents and other family members (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001)] was significantly associated with Machiavellianism, but only for men. In sum, higher levels of Machiavellianism seem to be associated with more negative family environment. This may be through more rejecting and neglecting parenting (e.g., Kraut & Price, 1976; Láng & Birkás, 2015; Ojha, 2007) or less optimal family functioning in general (Láng, 2016a; Láng & Birkás, 2014).

To date, no specific theories are available to account for the ontology of Machiavellianism. Life History Theory (LHT; Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005) might give a good explanation for the development of Machiavellian traits. In their evolutionary theory of socialization, Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper (1991) suggest that individuals use parental practices to calibrate their life history strategy to environmental conditions. Individuals from dissolved or stressful families – where parents are uninvolved, inconsistent, or even absent – will adopt a fast life history strategy. This strategy includes opportunistic and exploitative interpersonal relationships in general, low commitment to romantic partners, and low parental investment. Dark personality traits – including psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism – are repeatedly found to be associated with fast life history strategy (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012). Thus, besides interparental functioning, family structure might also play an important role in the development of Machiavellianism.

With regard to gender differences, studies have repeatedly found boys to report higher levels of Machiavellianism (e.g., Czibor et al., 2017; Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016). Moreover, recent studies (Abell et al., 2015; Czibor et al., 2017) revealed that gender might significantly moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and outcome variables in children and adults as well. For school-aged boys, Abell et al. (2015) found that Machiavellianism was correlated with more direct and indirect aggression, being accepted more frequently by others, and accepting peers into their own group more frequently. For school-aged girls, Machiavellianism was related to less indirect aggression, being accepted less frequently by peer-groups, and less activity towards children approaching target participants' group. In adults, Czibor et al. (2017) found that women's Machiavellianism was associated with anxious personality traits, while men's Machiavellianism correlated with an opportunistic world view. Based on these results, gender as a moderator variable should be considered more frequently and more seriously in Machiavellianism research.

1.2. Functioning of the parental dyad and its relationship with child and adolescent adjustment

In the approach of family systems theory (Minuchin, 1985), when a child is born into a family, an additional function of the marital relationship emerges – wife and husband become mother and father and constitute together the family's executive subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). This interparental subsystem is an extension of the marital subsystem and represents and intersection between marital and parent-child relationships (Galdiolo & Roskam, 2016). Disturbed functioning in either

the marital or the interparental relationship negatively affects child adjustment from infancy to adolescence and maybe even beyond (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997; Cummings & Davies, 1994). In our studies, two indicators of interparental functioning were investigated in relation to Machiavellianism: perceived interparental conflict and coparenting. While interparental conflict can be perceived as existing but independent of the child, children are always the target of coparenting efforts.

Conflicts between parents over issues related to or independent from the family are common experience in each family. Interparental conflict is a multidimensional construct “that includes frequency, mode of expression, chronicity or duration, intensity, and degree of resolution” of disagreements between parents (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000, p.25). By now, several models have been developed to account for how children are affected by interparental conflicts. Grych and Fincham (1990) developed a cognitive-contextual model that highlighted cognitive appraisals as the most influential components. The Emotional Security Theory (EST) of Davies and Cummings (1994) emphasized children's experience of emotional security and perception of their parents' abilities to preserve family stability. The specific emotions theory by Crockenberg and Langrock (2001a, 2001b) focused on the role of children's emotional reactions to interparental conflicts and how these emotions are helpful in maintaining or achieving valued goals.

Compared to interparental conflict, coparenting represents a more specific aspect of interparental functioning. According to Feinberg (2003, p. 96), coparenting “refers to the ways that parents and/or parental figures relate to each other in the role of parents. Coparenting occurs when individuals have overlapping or shared responsibility for rearing particular children, and consists of the support and coordination (or lack of it) that parental figures exhibit in parenting”. Several aspects of coparenting were emphasized by different authors (Feinberg, 2003; Van Egeren, 2001; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004), but the essence of coparenting can be described by the following three components (Kolak & Volling, 2007). First, *cooperation* refers to the supportive and valuing attitude towards the other parental figure. Second, there may be *conflict* between the parental figures about childrearing issues. Third, *triangulation* may occur. Triangulation refers to the parent's efforts to form an alliance with the child against the other parental figure or to communication between parents through their child.

Child adjustment is tightly connected to both interparental conflict and coparenting. No matter whether of cross-sectional or longitudinal design, and irrespective of methodology (i.e., using observational or self-report data), several studies (Belsky, Woodworth, & Crnic, 1996; Buehler et al., 1997; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001; Teubert & Pinguart, 2010) found weak to moderate relationships between interparental discord and internalizing or externalizing symptoms in children and adolescents. In theory, Davies and Cummings (2006), Rhoades (2008), and Teubert and Pinguart (2010) argue that child age and gender could be an important moderator for the relationship between disturbed interparental functioning and child maladjustment. However, empirical findings considering the moderating effect of gender are inconsistent (for a review see Snyder, 1998).

2. Aims of the studies, hypotheses

Adolescents were chosen as the target age group out of two reasons. First, given the attitude like nature of Machiavellianism, it is by adolescence that Machiavellianism becomes a relatively stable construct (Kraut & Price, 1976). Second, although adolescents are in the process of disengaging from their families and spending more and more time with peers (Margolin, Godis, & John, 2001), families continue to play an important role in the healthy development of adolescents, which is based on positive coparenting (Weissman & Cohen, 1985).

In particular, we wanted to investigate the relationship between

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