



Machiavellianism and romantic relationship dissolution

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ABSTRACT

Despite the frequency with which relationships are dissolved and the consequences of this dissolution, few studies have considered the manner in which individual differences (rather than characteristics of the relationship itself) influence the selection of a break up strategy or break up related distress. The current studies were conducted to address this issue. In Study 1, women ($N = 141$) completed Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) and break up strategy (Collins & Gillath, 2012) questionnaires. Women with high levels of Machiavellianism were more likely than those with low levels of Machiavellianism to employ Avoidance/Withdrawal, Cost Escalation, Manipulation, and Distant/Mediated Communication when terminating a relationship. In Study 2, women ($N = 125$) completed Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) and break up distress (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010) measures. Machiavellianism did not predict post relationship dissolution distress. Findings are discussed in relation to the Machiavellian interpersonal style and relationship preferences.

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1. Introduction

Romantic relationships form an important part of our social landscape. In most Western societies, men and women follow a pattern of serial monogamy characterised by the repeated formation and dissolution of romantic relationships (Fisher, 1989; MacDonald, 1995). When relationships are terminated (i.e., a 'break up'), it is typically instigated by one member of the couple, with mutual agreement less prevalent (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Factors increasing the likelihood of relationship dissolution include a partner's failure to meet expectations (e.g., sexual dissatisfaction), unequal commitment, a desire for freedom, and external factors (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Hill et al., 1976; Sprecher, 1994). Though these events are relatively common (Knox, Zusman, & Nieves, 1998; Robak & Weitzman, 1998), romantic relationship dissolution is associated with substantial distress and a range of emotions including anger, confusion, sadness, and regret are reported (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Sbarra, 2006). The termination of a relationship also has important consequences for physical and mental health (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Lower levels of distress are experienced by those initiating the break up (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Drigotas, 1996; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998); however, those who make the decision to break up also report a range of negative outcomes such as sleep irregularities and headaches (Akert, 1998).

Previous research has typically focused on the consequences of relationship dissolution and those factors influencing the impact of a relationship break up rather than the manner in which the break up occurs. A range of strategies may be employed to end a relationship (Baxter, 1982, 1984), which vary according to the level of compassion displayed towards the partner and the level of directness (Baxter, 1985; Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010). Collins and Gillath (2012) identify seven break up strategies: avoidance/withdrawal (e.g. avoiding contact with the partner); positive tone/self-blame (e.g. taking the blame for the break up); open confrontation (e.g. providing honest explanations for the break up); cost escalation (e.g. making the relationship increasingly unpleasant); manipulation (e.g. hinting to other people that they wish for a break up), distant/mediated communication (e.g. terminating the relationship indirectly); and de-escalation (e.g. suggesting that the break up is temporary). A range of factors may influence the selection of a break up strategy such as the nature of the relationship (Banks, Altendorf, Greene, & Cody, 1987; Collins & Gillath, 2012) which subsequently impact the partner's reaction (Lambert & Hughes, 2010). Despite the frequency with which relationships are dissolved and the consequences of this dissolution, few studies have considered the manner in which individual differences (rather than characteristics of the relationship itself) influence the selection of a break up strategy or break up related distress. This may reflect reports that individual differences (such as the Big Five personality traits) have limited influence on relationship dissolution when compared to relationship factors e.g., commitment, love, and relationship satisfaction (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Furthermore, where the impact of individual differences on break up experience has been investigated, this typically focuses on whether relationship dissolution has

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occurred rather than the strategies employed to break up with a partner or the consequences of this (e.g., Kurdek, 1993; Olderbak & Figueredo, 2010).

The present studies consider the extent to which Machiavellianism influences the selection of a break up strategy and post break up distress. Machiavellianism, characterised by emotional detachment, distrust, and a willingness to exploit others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Vecchio & Sussman, 1991), has been shown to influence the attraction of a romantic partner, relationship quality, and relationship maintenance. For example, those with high levels of Machiavellianism display low levels of relationship commitment, increased infidelity, and higher levels of sexual deception (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Brewer & Abell, 2015). Previous research also demonstrates that individuals higher in Machiavellianism display concern over their reputation through strategic thinking and do not engage in impulsive behaviour (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2011a; Jones & Paulhus, 2011b).

Indeed although Machiavellianism is associated with hostility, Machiavellian tactics are not (Jones & Neria, 2015). Such characteristics may influence the strategies that partners employ to end a relationship with a romantic partner. For example, women high on Machiavellianism may adopt strategies that minimise conflict. Indeed whilst in a romantic relationship, women with higher Machiavellianism scores use subtle tactics such as covert resistance (e.g., being 'sneaky' when flirting with other men) to resist their partner's mate guarding behaviours (Abell & Brewer, 2016). Such behaviour may be employed to protect their reputation but also allow extra-pair relationships. The use of such subtle tactics are predicted to extend to relationship dissolution. Specifically, women with higher Machiavellianism are predicted to employ subtle strategies to end their romantic relationship that serve to reduce conflict and protect their reputation. These strategies may also retain opportunities for exploitation and manipulation of their former partner, of particular importance given the number of women who remain in contact with ex partners either as a friend or lover (Halpern-Meehin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2012; Mogilski & Welling, 2016).

Furthermore, Machiavellianism is associated with a lack of connection to their own feelings (Christie & Geis, 1970; Wastell & Booth, 2003) and with seeking closeness in others primarily to manipulate whilst hiding their own vulnerabilities and weakness to order to avoid exploitation themselves (Ináncsi, Láng, & Bereczkei, 2015; Sherry, Hewitt, Besser, Flett, & Klein, 2006). Women high on Machiavellianism report that non-romantic relationships provide low levels of intimacy and emotional security (Abell, Brewer, Qualter, & Austin, 2016) and show a preference for relationships with low levels of emotional closeness and commitment (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). This lack of attachment to others and concern for hiding their own vulnerabilities may predict low levels of post break up distress amongst women higher in Machiavellianism.

The current studies investigate the influence of Machiavellianism on the manner in which women break up with their partner and the distress experienced when their partner terminates a relationship. Based on previous research, we predicted that those with high levels of Machiavellianism would be more likely to employ break up strategies involving manipulation, avoidance/withdrawal, distant/mediated communication, de-escalation, and cost-escalation, and would be less likely to adopt open confrontation. No prediction was made for positive tone/self-blame as it was unclear whether those high on Machiavellianism would be less concerned with the feelings of their partner (and hence be less likely to employ this strategy) or more aware of the potential for retaliation (and hence be more likely to employ this strategy). Due to the poor relationship quality experienced by those high on Machiavellianism, we predicted lower post break up distress for those with high levels of Machiavellianism. Important sex differences occur with regard to relationship dissolution; for example women are more likely than men to initiate a break up (Hill et al., 1976), cite different reasons for break ups (Lampard, 2014), and adjust better to relationship

dissolution (Evans, Scourfield, & Moore, 2014; Helgeson, 1994). Furthermore, it has been argued that the influence of Machiavellianism on interpersonal relationships may differ for men and women (McHoskey, 2001). Hence, we investigated the influence of Machiavellianism on relationship break up behaviour in women only.

2. Study 1: Method

2.1. Participants

Heterosexual women ($N = 141$) aged 16–70 years ($M = 22.96$, $SD = 8.15$) were recruited via online research forums and social networking sites. Average relationship length and length of time between break up and study completion were 27.90 ($SD = 41.46$) and 22.33 ($SD = 35.50$) months respectively.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Each participant completed the Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) and the Break up Strategies Questionnaire (Collins & Gillath, 2012) in relation to the romantic partner that they most recently decided to break up with.

The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a uni-dimensional measure of Machiavellianism which assesses interactions with others, morality, and cynicism. The scale contains 20 items rated on a 7 point likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Example items include "Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so" and "Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble". Ten items were reverse coded and higher scores indicate higher Machiavellianism.

The Break up Strategies Questionnaire (Collins & Gillath, 2012) is a 43 item measure of the strategies employed to break up with a partner. Participants respond to each item on a 7 point likert scale (1 = *did not use strategy* at all to 7 = *definitely used this strategy*). These assess 7 strategies: avoidance/withdrawal (11 items); positive tone/self-blame (10 items); open confrontation (4 items); cost escalation (4 items); manipulation (5 items); distant/mediated communication (4 items); and de-escalation (5 items). Example items include "I avoided contact with my partner as much as possible" (avoidance/withdrawal), "I honestly conveyed my wishes to my partner" (open confrontation), and "I intentionally 'leaked' my desire to break up to someone I anticipated would inform my partner" (manipulation). One item was reverse coded and higher scores indicate greater use of the break up strategy.

In the present study each measure (Machiavellianism: $\alpha = 0.70$; avoidance/withdrawal $\alpha = 0.89$; positive tone/self-blame $\alpha = 0.84$; open confrontation $\alpha = 0.71$; cost escalation $\alpha = 0.80$; manipulation $\alpha = 0.78$; distant/mediated communication $\alpha = 0.67$; and de-escalation $\alpha = 0.67$) demonstrated acceptable reliability.

3. Study 1: Results

Significant positive correlations were identified between Machiavellianism and the use of avoidance/withdrawal, cost escalation, manipulation, and distant/mediated communication break up strategies. These data are shown in Table 1. A series of regression analyses revealed that Machiavellianism predicted the use of avoidance/withdrawal, $F(1,124) = 5.07$, $p = 0.026$, cost escalation, $F(1,122) = 14.31$, $p < 0.001$, manipulation, $F(1,123) = 8.40$, $p = 0.004$, and distant/mediated communication, $F(1,123) = 6.10$, $p = 0.015$, such that women with higher levels of Machiavellianism were more likely to employ each break up strategy. Machiavellianism did not predict positive tone/self-blame, $F(1,125) = 0.56$, $p = 0.458$, open confrontation, $F(1,125) = 0.51$, $p = 0.476$, and de-escalation, $F(1,122) = 1.46$, $p = 0.230$.

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