



Prevailing to the peers' detriment: Organizational constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their peers



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ABSTRACT

Since Christie and Geis's (1970) seminal work suggested that Machiavellians win more and are persuaded less, researchers have debated the merits and faults of Machiavellianism. Recent findings suggest competition over resources lead Machiavellians to secure their superior's approval, promoting their career advancement. However, the strategies Machiavellians use in such contexts have yet to be identified. Social undermining research suggests that undermining one's coworkers might make it difficult for targets of undermining to maintain effective working relationships while promoting a perpetrator's relative status (Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006). Thus, drawing on trait activation theory, we argue that resource constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their coworkers, which might help them achieve higher relative status. Additionally, with increased effort devoted toward undermining one's peers, Machiavellians should be distracted from performing core duties resulting in increased production deviance. Data collected from 170 employees supported our arguments. Our study addresses a gap in the literature by suggesting that Machiavellians successfully navigate competitive work environments by undermining their coworkers. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications for both understanding and mitigating the extended detrimental influence of workplace Machiavellianism.

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1. Introduction

As evinced by Niccolo Machiavelli's writing, there is a longstanding interest in influencing others to attain and retain power or status in organizational life. Christie and Geis (1970), who pioneered the study of Machiavellianism, noted that Machiavellians manipulate more, win more, and are persuaded less by others. This self-interested characterization has drawn scholarly attention from multiple disciplines, including neuroscience (Bagozzi et al., 2013), management (Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009; Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014; Zagenczyk, Restubog, Kiewitz, Kiaad, & Tang, 2014), behavioral ethics (Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2014; Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2014), evolutionary psychology (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996), and of course personality psychology (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Though somewhat dated, Christie and Geis's (1970) initial claims still seem to hold up today, as recently Spurk, Keller,

and Hirschi (2016) found that early career Machiavellians were more likely to be both in a position of leadership and satisfied with their careers.

Machiavellians seem to ascend social and organizational hierarchies through deceit and manipulation, though certain circumstances seem to facilitate their success more so than others. Kuyumcu and Dahling (2014) observed that Machiavellians received positive task performance appraisals from their supervisors when they were forced to compete with their peers over resources. Similarly, in a meta-analysis of the personality–job performance literature Judge and Zapata (2015) observed that disagreeable workers, who are commonly described as having Machiavellian tendencies (Guenole, 2014; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015), were viewed as productive in highly competitive occupations (e.g., being a coach or sports scout, being a financial manager). These findings suggest that the presence of competition motivates Machiavellians to differentiate themselves from their peers. However, with the wealth of evidence linking Machiavellianism to both counterproductive and unethical workplace behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012), it seems likely that these circumstances would motivate Machiavellians to use illegitimate strategies that facilitate their own career advancement, perhaps to the detriment of their peers and organization. Using theory to predict which strategies Machiavellians use in these conditions might

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help practitioners to manage Machiavellians more effectively and reward legitimate performance-enhancing behavior.

Here, we use person-situation interactionist theory to identify strategies that competition over resources motivate Machiavellians to employ, answering calls for more integrative research in behavioral ethics (Hatrup & Jackson, 1996). Drawing on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argue that competitive work conditions, such as those created by a lack of resources for doing one's work (see Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014), motivate Machiavellians to use strategies that would increase their chances of attaining higher status and control over others (Dahling et al., 2009). Further, with increased attention devoted toward attaining status and control over others, less attention would be devoted toward completing one's own tasks. In the next sections, we further delineate these arguments. We begin first with an overview of trait activation theory (TAT) and the evidence supporting it, then describe the focal constructs of our study with regard to TAT, and list the hypotheses stemming from TAT.

2. Theoretical overview

Trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) is a person-situation interactionist model of job performance that links personality traits to job performance outcomes via trait activation, which is “the process by which individuals express their traits when presented with trait-relevant situational cues” (p. 502). To illustrate, suppose a situation arises where an individual needs assistance. This is an opportunity to exercise compassion, which is a behavior that compassionate individuals find either easy to perform, rewarding to do, or possibly both. In these situations, the opportunity to help others would motivate compassionate individuals to offer assistance. Thus, it would be said that individuals high on compassion would have their compassion “activated” leading to helping behavior. Conversely, an individual lacking compassion would be unlikely to help (all things being equal). Extended to whole occupations, compassion would become activated in those occupations providing more opportunities to exercise compassion, resulting in higher productivity for compassionate individuals. Thus, occupations described by situation trait relevance would motivate individuals with relevant tendencies to engage in behaviors they are inclined to perform.

Trait activation theory has been strongly supported. Using both meta-analytic and publicly available data (i.e., the Occupational Information Network's (O*NET) data descriptors; see N. G. Peterson et al., 2001), Judge and Zapata (2015) found that data regarding the importance of trait-relevant occupational characteristics can predict which traits would predict performance in an occupation. For instance, they found that importance ratings for social skills requirements predicted that social traits in the Big Five (e.g., emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness) would be associated with higher job performance ratings. Their findings provide clues about the situational features that might activate these personality traits.

In regard to Machiavellianism, identifying occupational features high in situation trait relevance requires a consideration of the Big Five traits that are most relevant for Machiavellianism. O'Boyle et al. (2012) used meta-analysis to link Machiavellianism to the Big Five, finding as argued elsewhere (Guenole, 2014) that Machiavellianism could be profiled by Big Five traits and narrow facets. In a relative importance analysis, they demonstrated that disagreeableness was by far the most important explanatory factor. This suggests that occupational features that are relevant for disagreeableness should also be relevant for Machiavellianism. Judge and Zapata found that disagreeable individuals received higher performance appraisals in occupations with a high level of competition requirements (e.g., sports scout, financial manager). Applying their findings to Machiavellianism suggests that competitive work environments would activate Machiavellianism. However, the legitimacy of these trait expressions requires an understanding of the Machiavellianism construct.

2.1. Machiavellianism

Considered to be an early political scientist (De Grazia, 1989), Machiavelli encouraged ruthlessly pragmatic strategies for acquiring and sustaining power in organizational life. As scholars examined Machiavelli's writings, most notably *The Prince*, Machiavellianism emerged as a multidimensional personality construct defined by four dimensions: (a) the amoral manipulation of others, (b) distrust in others' intentions, (c) desire for control over others, and (d) a strong desire to status and extrinsic career success (Dahling et al., 2009). Research suggests that Machiavellianism is a potent predictor of unethical and counterproductive workplace behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2012). To attain higher status and control over others, Machiavellians might deceive, charm, threaten, ingratiate, or use other strategies involving impression management or interpersonal manipulation (Nelson & Gilbertson, 1991). Thus, in TAT terms, Machiavellians would employ these strategies in situations that provide opportunities to attain status and exercise control over others. We now turn to situations that we believe would provide Machiavellians with opportunities to use these strategies to satisfy their desires.

2.2. The moderating role of competition over resources

Lacking the necessary resources, equipment, or cooperation to translate effort and ability into valuable outputs is a theme that has long described organizational life (see Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Organizational resource constraints “represent situations or things that prevent employees from translating ability and effort into high levels of job performance” (Spector & Jex, 1998). Peters and O'Connor (1980) identified several constraints such as a lack of job-relevant information, tools and equipment, raw material or supplies, financial support, help from peers, training, or time to do one's work. Legitimate performers need such resources to perform well and so lacking these resources makes it difficult to be productive (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Villanova & Roman, 1993). In such contexts, competition over resources can be intense (Spector & Jex, 1998).

Resource constraints are commonly viewed as impeding performance (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Villanova & Roman, 1993). However, they may also be viewed as motivating opportunistic behavior (Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Kuyumcu and Dahling argued that resource constraints create opportunities to engage in manipulative tactics to garner resources, leaving little for others. Having these resources would help Machiavellians outperform those who avoid manipulative tactics.

Taking this analysis further using TAT (Tett & Burnett, 2003), perceptions of resource constraints should motivate Machiavellians to use egregious status-enhancing strategies because competition over resources provide opportunities to gain status by marginalizing the competition, which can be done via social undermining. Social undermining behavior refers to strategic behavior that hinders, over time, the ability of one's coworkers to establish or maintain effective interpersonal relationships, work-related success, or a favorable reputation with one's peers (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). It is well-established that Machiavellians by their very nature are willing to do what it takes to satisfy career goals (Dahling et al., 2009; Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Further, as argued elsewhere (Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006; Greenbaum et al., 2014), social undermining behaviors may help perpetrators gain higher relative status. Machiavellians may make their peers look like poor performers by delaying their peers' work, deliberately slow them down by feeding them misleading information, or spreading rumors, because these behaviors would be viewed as instrumental in marginalizing the competition. Thus, we argue that when Machiavellians perceive organizational constraints, they would be motivated to undermine their coworkers whom they distrust and view as threats to their relative status.

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