A moderated mediation model of Machiavellianism, social undermining, political skill, and supervisor-rated job performance

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ABSTRACT

The present study addresses current limitations in our understanding of how employee Machiavellianism impacts subjective ratings of job performance. The existing literature suggests that Machiavellianism shares a complex relationship with job performance, which has led some researchers to suggest that Machiavellianism may be a poor predictor of job performance. In the current study, we confront this claim by proposing and testing a moderated mediation model that demonstrates a situation (i.e., social undermining) that activates a skill set particularly important for Machiavellians (i.e., political skill). We analyzed field data ($N = 268$ employees, 96 supervisors) and found that political skill partially mediated the conditional indirect effect of Machiavellianism and social undermining on subjective ratings of job performance. Further, Machiavellians demonstrated higher levels of political skill when they perceived themselves to have been socially undermined by their coworkers, and this increased level of political skill led to higher ratings of job performance. We discuss the meaningfulness of these findings and the implications they have for future research.

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1. Introduction

In their review, Spain, Harms, and LeBreton (2014) highlighted the importance of studying dark personality traits in the workplace and their predictive utility of important work outcomes. This is particularly true for Machiavellianism (Mach). Contrary to research on "normal" personality traits (e.g., Big 5), researchers have consistently suggested that Mach may be a better predictor of counterproductive work behaviors than job performance (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis by O'Boyle et al. (2012) revealed a significant and positive relationship between Mach and counterproductive work behaviors. Although there is substantial potential for dark personality traits to serve as important predictors of job performance, these relationships remain unclear and understudied.

The best evidence of the Mach-job performance relationship came from O'Boyle et al. (2012), who reported a relatively weak, although significant, negative relationship between Mach and job performance. Furthermore, the existing literature contains several nuanced perspectives as to why Mach may be both positively and negatively related to job performance (Bagozzi et al., 2013; Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009). This is problematic for the literature because the conflicting findings hinder overall understanding of how Mach truly

impacts job performance in organizations. Recently, scholars have called for researchers to shift their focus to the mechanisms and conditions under which the relationship between Mach and job performance unfolds (Harms et al., 2011; O'Boyle et al., 2012). We seek to mitigate this confusion by proposing and testing a model based upon trait activation theory (e.g., Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Gutterman, 2000). We propose there are certain circumstances in which Mach can be indirectly tied to positive supervisor ratings of job performance and a mechanism through which this occurs.

Trait activation theory has been used in prior research to capture certain negative behaviors that Machiavellians exhibit in trait-relevant situations (e.g., engaging in unethical behavior when abused by supervisors, Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the term "Machs" indicate those employees high in the Machiavellianism trait. As opposed to prior research on Mach in organizations that has largely focused on undesirable individual outcomes such as counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009) or unethical behavior (Greenbaum et al., 2014), we join the limited dialogue on the Mach-job performance relationship (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Smith, Wallace, & Jordan, 2016). In doing so, we contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we propose and test a trait activation model of Mach in which social undermining activates hidden political skill that otherwise would go unnoticed in Machs. It is through the activation of political skill, which has been shown to positively relate to subjective ratings of job performance (Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015), that we expect Mach to be indirectly linked to positive ratings of job performance. Second, we offer a study that explicates

differential effects of social undermining for Machs versus their co-workers. We contend that political skill is activated in Machs when they believe themselves to have been socially undermined. However, this does not hold true for their coworkers. Finally, we advance the current conversation by proposing and testing a model that provides a more nuanced perspective of the Mach-job performance relationship.

1.1. Machiavellianism and political skill

Christie and Geis (1970) derived Mach from Niccolò Machiavelli's (1513/2008) *The Prince*. Machs are described as manipulative, power hungry, self-interested, and cynical (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). In addition to operating with the premise that the ends justify the means, Machs possess a "duplicitous interpersonal style assumed to emerge from a broader network of cynical beliefs and pragmatic morality" (Jones & Paulhus, 2009, p.93). Scholarly interest in Mach has grown, particularly in the workplace. Many have attributed this trend to recent scandals involving corporate greed and ethical failures (Dahling et al., 2009; Harms & Spain, 2015; Spain et al., 2014). Correspondingly, Mach has been portrayed in a negative light as researchers have focused more on Mach's relationship with undesired behaviors (Dahling et al., 2009). For instance, Mach has been shown to relate to certain maladaptive mating behaviors (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010), antisocial behaviors (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), and unethical behavior (Greenbaum et al., 2014). Even beneficial outcomes related to Mach have been suggested to be guided by self-interest and exploitation of others (Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). For example, Machs may use impression management tactics to ascend to positions of leadership (Hogan & Hogan, 2001) or use manipulation tactics to make others surrender resources or engage in helping behaviors (Jones & Paulhus, 2009).

The most consistent finding is the positive relationship between Mach and counterproductive work behaviors (Cohen, 2016; Dahling et al., 2009; O'Boyle et al., 2012; Wu & Lebreton, 2011). Results have been relatively less stable for the relationship between Mach and job performance. In their meta-analysis, O'Boyle et al. (2012) reported an overall correlation between Mach and job performance of −0.06 ($p < 0.01$). Prior Mach research has yielded little in the way of mediating mechanisms that help clarify why Mach negatively (or positively) impacts job performance (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014).

We contend that political skill, defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005, p.127), is activated differently in Machs than in their coworkers in certain social situations. Organizations have been portrayed as a political arena (Mintzberg, 1983, 1985) and the political employee has been portrayed as someone capable of exercising influence through persuasion, manipulation, and negotiation. Ferris et al. (2005) developed the Political Skill Inventory (PSI), which is comprised of four dimensions (i.e., networking ability, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, apparent sincerity), to capture general abilities tied to prior work. Scholars have traditionally positioned political skill as a socially advantageous behavioral strategy at work (Blickle et al., 2008; Munyon et al., 2015; Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, & Thatcher, 2007) as political skill has been shown to be positively related to job performance ratings. In their recent meta-analysis, Munyon et al. (2015) found a significant positive effect for political skill and task performance ratings ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$) across 50 studies.

1.2. Activating political skill in Machs: The case of social undermining

A common concern shared by researchers is that the Mach-job performance relationship is likely dependent upon unstudied moderating variables (Dahling et al., 2009; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014; O'Boyle et al., 2012). For instance, Dahling et al. (2009) found that tenure moderated this relationship such that as tenure increased, high-Machs outperformed low-Machs in the eyes of supervisors. Social undermining has received a great deal of attention since it was introduced by Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002). Duffy et al. (2002, p. 332) defined social undermining as "behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation." In the current study, we follow much of the prior work in this area by focusing on the victim's perceived experience of social undermining.

Couching our model in trait activation theory, we contend that social undermining is one moderating variable in the Mach-performance relationship. Trait activation theory suggests that personality traits are expressed in response to trait-relevant situations (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). Trait activation theory provides an interactionist perspective of personality and context. According to Tett and Guterman (2000, p.398), "personality traits require trait-relevant situations for their expression." Social undermining is a trait-relevant context for Machs. First, social undermining is an aggressive behavior intended to hinder one's work-related success and reputation (Duffy et al., 2002). These are two outcomes that are highly salient to Machs (Christie & Geis, 1970). Therefore, Machs perceive social undermining as a threat to both potential success and their reputations. In the event a Mach perceives a coworker to hinder his or her ability to succeed at work, hinder his or her reputation, or hinder his or her ability to maintain positive personal relationships (i.e., social undermining), it is likely the Mach becomes particularly motivated to influence others in a way that enhances his or her personal objectives (Jones & Paulhus, 2009).

1.3. The present study

In the present study, we proposed and tested a conditional indirect effects model of Mach, social undermining, political skill, and job performance. Indeed, Machs likely exert extra attention and effort to their social setting and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. In this case, political skill will be activated by the perception of being socially undermined. Machs who believe they have been socially undermined will report higher levels of political skill. We further propose the interaction of the two activates political skill, which positively impacts subjective ratings of job performance. Thus, our first hypothesis is that social undermining and Mach will interact such that Machs who perceive they have been socially undermined will report higher levels of political skill than Machs not perceiving social undermining. Furthermore, it is through this conditional indirect effect that Machs may actually positively impact, albeit indirectly, subjective ratings of job performance. Therefore, our second hypothesis is that the interaction between Mach and social undermining indirectly and positively affects subjective supervisor ratings of job performance through political skill. When Machs perceive they have been socially undermined, political skill is activated, leading to increased job performance.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduate students from a public Midwestern university and a public Southeastern university in the United States served as organizational contacts to recruit working adults to participate in the study in exchange for extra credit in an upper-class management course. Each student gave a working adult (i.e., 18 years old and working at least 20 hours per week) an envelope that contained instructions for two online surveys, 1) an employee survey and 2) a supervisor survey. The students did not participate, unless they qualified by meeting the aforementioned criteria. These data were collected in 2015 over a period of four months. We followed procedures used in previous research to ensure data quality and maintain the integrity of the data (e.g., Greenbaum et al., 2014; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Each student was given his/her own instruction sheet for hand-delivering the survey envelope. Each envelope was tracked with a packet