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Brief Report

When do Machs feel threatened? An investigation into fair situations

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ABSTRACT

The Machiavellian (Mach) personality trait describes individuals who rely on manipulative strategies to achieve their goals, which are primarily extrinsic (money, success, power), often at the cost of interpersonal relationships. However, little is known about the environmental conditions that cue Machs to act in deviant ways. We explore the impact of fair environments on Machs' perceptions of threat. Tested in an experimental study (N = 311), our results provide preliminary evidence that, contrary to normative responses to fairness, Machs have negative cognitive (experience threat) and behavioral intention (intimidation tactics) reactions to fair situations, and thus might actually function more normatively in unfair environments.

1. Introduction

Machiavellian individuals (Machs) manipulate and exploit others for their own advantage (Bereczkei et al., 2015; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996) and are characterized as distrustful, cynical, and egocentric (Christie & Geis, 1970). The extant literature suggests that Mach decision-making processes run counter to the normative assumptions most social psychology research focuses on (e.g., norm of reciprocity, social norms, etc.) and rather is more associated with agentic goals and maladaptive behavior (e.g., Lau & Marsee, 2013). However, less is understood about the environmental conditions that cue Machs to experience counter-normative reactions. Machs use planned and strategic manipulation attempts to achieve agentic goals, and possess the flexibility to adjust to their environment (Jones & Paulhus, 2010a). Based on this and the widely-supported notion that behavior is a product of both the person and the situation (Lewin, 1951), we expand Mach research by considering the role of situational factors.

Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine how *fair* situations might trigger Machs to feel *threatened*, leading them to display intimidation behaviors. We propose that Machs are more likely to perceive threat in fair environments because fair situations, being marked by low uncertainty (Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997), eradicate opportunities for Machs to utilize their manipulative strategies. Further, when experiencing threat, Machs are likely to intimidate in pursuit of their extrinsic goals.

To our knowledge, little research has explored the situational factors and underlying motives that prompt deviant, aggressive behavior in Machs. From a theoretical standpoint, this study aids researchers in understanding the situational reasons why Machs might act aggressively, thus providing boundary conditions for the Mach-deviant behavior relationship. From a practical standpoint, understanding what situational cues encourage Machs to intimidate can be helpful in alleviating those conditions, lessening the chance of this negative behavior. This is particularly important when considering workplace aggression, as it results in negative outcomes for individuals and organizations, such as increased anxiety, turnover intentions, job dissatisfaction, and job neglect (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997). In the age where workplace bullying and aggressive workplace behavior is receiving increased attention in the popular press, intimidation tactics cannot be taken lightly by organizations. Indeed, intimidation fits the definition and findings that most workplace aggression is not physical but rather verbal and indirect (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999), and thus it is imperative to the functioning of organizations to minimize intimidation.

2. Hypothesis development

Machs are self-interested and pragmatic with a distrustful view of human nature and who use deceitful and exploitative strategies to meet their agentic goals (e.g., extrinsic motivation for power, money, and status; Christie & Geis, 1970; McHoskey, 1999;

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O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & Story, 2013). Machs have an inclination to maximize their own individual profit and adopt manipulative strategies, such as economic opportunism (Sakalaki, Kanellaki, & Richardson, 2009) that help them to achieve their goals. Though, to a certain extent, everyone is capable of manipulating, Machs are more likely to manipulate and actually *rely* on their manipulation skills as their primary resource for goal attainment (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Wilson et al., 1996), as they do not believe their effort, hard work, and perseverance (legitimate means) will be efficacious (Sakalaki et al., 2009). However, we argue Machs' ability to rely on opportunistic strategies depends on situational characteristics such as fairness.

Given this, it is likely that Machs perceive threat in fair situations because their ability to facilitate manipulative strategies is diminished. Threat is a negative evaluation, involving the perception that control is lost and thus personal loss is likely (Jackson & Dutton, 1988). When individuals feel that they cannot rely on their own physical, social, psychological, and material resources to deal with the situation and the demands, they experience a perceived loss of control, and ultimately view the situation as threatening (Vander Elst et al., 2014). Fair situations are marked by equity such that reward allocations are well-defined and decision making is based heavily upon objective and legitimate reasons (Colquitt, 2001).

Machs, being reliant on exploitative strategies and more attuned to threat (Neria, Vizcaino, & Jones, 2016), should feel they have less opportunity to utilize manipulation to achieve their goals, which should lead to heightened perceptions of threat. Machs prefer to operate in conditions where there is low structure, few rules, and where they have decision-making authority (e.g., Bereczkei et al., 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2009), which are characteristics of unfair situations. Indeed, fair situations are more mentally taxing for Machs (Bereczkei et al., 2015). On the other hand, non-Mach individuals that have similar and competing intentions can employ legitimate strategies towards these ends and succeed, leaving the Mach, relying primarily on unsanctioned means, to feel they are ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the fair situation. Rather, Machs should feel more comfortable in unfair environments because they are confusing, filled with contradictions, and lacking rules and control. Thus, these situations are ripe with opportunities to manipulate for self-interested ends. Indeed, unfair situations are often associated with perceptions of organizational politics (Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995), demonstrating that such environments provide leeway for achieving ends through unsanctioned means.

Hypothesis 1. Machs will experience threat in fair environments.

Furthermore, we argue that Machs who perceive threat will counter with intimidation tactics to further pursue their elevated desire to fulfill extrinsic motivations and goals. Intimidation is an assertive-tactical impression management tactic (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984) characterized by individuals projecting power or a threatening image so that they may be viewed as dangerous and powerful (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005), and is a deliberate and intentional behavior often utilized when a positive social image will not succeed in a given situation (Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly, 2004). However, this tactic hinders long-term positive impressions, as it causes fear and dislike (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007) and damages interpersonal relationships, leading to interpersonal conflict.

Machs have an innate need to control situations (Christie & Geis, 1970), and threats diminish their intrinsic motivation even further (Deci & Cascio, 1972) because the focus on extrinsic goals becomes heightened in these situations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This heightened extrinsic focus is associated with maladaptive behaviors (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), such as intimidation. Because intimidation is utilized to portray an image that one is powerful, Machs, in the face of a threatening situation, will be inclined to employ this tactic in hopes to regain a sense of control and power.

Hypothesis 2. Threat will mediate the relationship between Mach and intimidation and this relationship will be moderated by fairness such that this mediation will be strongest in fair situations.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 311 upper-level (juniors and seniors) undergraduate management students from a large university in the Northeast United States participated in a laboratory experiment to receive research credit. Participants averaged 21.64 years of age (SD = 2.27) and were 58.5% male, 55.6% White, 36.7% Asian, 1.9% African American, 2.3% Hispanic, and 3.5% other. Sixty-five percent were employed at the time the study was conducted. There were no significant differences in study variables between working and non-working participants.

Sample size decisions were based on the $N{:}q$ rule (Jackson, 2003), which states the ideal sample size (N) to estimated parameters (q) ratio is 20:1, but 10:1 would be adequate. PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes, 2012) was used in the current analysis and estimates 9 parameters. Thus, we sought to have a minimum sample size of 90 [$N(10){:}q(9)$] and an ideal sample size of 180 [$N(20){:}q(9)$] for each of the three conditions (discussed below), or 270 to 540 total. Our current sample size (3 1 1) falls within this range suggesting that we have adequate power for the given analysis.

3.2. Procedures

An experimental design was used to test the hypotheses. We conducted 77 sessions in which participants were randomly assigned to groups of three to five. They were told that they would be working together to create an advertisement for a new smartphone and that one member would be selected by the experimenter for a hypothetical promotion (agentic goal). Participants were asked to complete a pre-questionnaire that assessed Mach. Afterwards, participants were given ten-minutes to work together on the smartphone advertisement and were given specific instructions to work together to fill out task-relevant information. During the task, the experimenter appeared to be watching the participants' performance. After completing the task, participants were given a five-minute break and told the promotion decision would be made during this time. When the participants returned to the room, the experimenter handed out the promotion decision notification. Lastly, participants were given a post-questionnaire to capture their cognitive and behavioral-intention reactions.

Unbeknownst to the participants, a confederate was present in each session and the confederate was selected for the promotion in every condition. Depending on the condition, the confederate behaved towards the group in different ways. In the *instrumental* condition, the confederate displayed high extra-role behaviors directed only towards the experimenter (the person who will be "choosing" the individual for the hypothetical promotion), including the confederate having a personal conversation with the experimenter, helping the experimenter with passing and collecting documents, picking up items the experimenter dropped (stack of papers and a cup of pens). In the *authentic* condition, the confederate behaved the same way to the experimenter, but in addition the confederate also displayed extra-role behaviors towards the group. These behaviors included the confederate introducing himself and