



The relation between memories of childhood psychological maltreatment and Machiavellianism



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ABSTRACT

Machiavellianism is a hot topic in several branches of psychology. Using Life-History Theory several studies identified Machiavellianism as a fast life strategy. According to this idea, Machiavellianism should be related to childhood adversities. Using a sample of adults we investigated the relationship between Machiavellianism and self-reported memories of childhood psychological maltreatment. Participants (247 individuals, 141 female, 32.38 ± 5.43 years of age on average) completed the Mach-IV Scale and the Childhood Abuse and Trauma Scale. Results showed a relationship between neglect and Machiavellianism in general, Machiavellian tactics, and Machiavellian world view. There was also a marginally significant link between punishment and Machiavellian tactics. Results are discussed from a moral developmental perspective and through the alexithymia hypothesis of Machiavellianism.

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1. Introduction

Machiavellianism – a personality trait or attitude that is characterized by a deceitful, materialistic, unemotional, and selfish stance (Christie & Geis, 1970) – has been the focus of intense research since the 1970s. Social, organizational, personality, clinical and evolutionary psychological studies on the topic have been written countless. At the same time, developmental researchers have paid far less attention to the emergence of Machiavellianism. At this time, there are two main paradigms that try to explain how certain individuals attain Machiavellian attitudes or personality traits. The first is based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, and the other is based on Life-History Theory (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005) and Belsky's evolutionary theory of socialization (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2011). Based on these theories, we investigated whether self-reported memories of childhood psychological maltreatment could be linked to Machiavellianism in adulthood.

1.1. Machiavellianism and social learning

In studying the relationship between Machiavellian attitudes in parents and in their offspring, two competing hypotheses have been articulated. According to the complementarity hypothesis (Christie & Geis, 1970), children take on roles in parent–child interaction that are complementary to their parents'. Thus, children of

Machiavellian parents would behave in a moral and submissive way, whereas children of non-Machiavellian parents would become manipulative, amoral, and cynical. In a study, Braginsky (1970) found partial support for this hypothesis. The modeling or identification hypothesis (Kraut & Price, 1976) suggests that children would behave in a way similar to their parents. This process is suggested to be mediated by vicarious learning. Thus, children of Machiavellian parents would become Machiavellian individuals themselves as well. Several studies have supported this hypothesis (Kraut & Price, 1976; Ojha, 2007; Rai & Gupta, 1989). The seeming contradiction of the above described two hypotheses can be solved if age is taken into consideration. Children – and adults of course – beyond the oedipal age and with the ability of identification show levels of Machiavellianism similar to their parents' (Pilch, 2008).

In our view, social learning or modeling is not the only possible mediating process between parental Machiavellianism and Machiavellianism in offspring. Being egocentric, having a cynical view of human nature (Christie & Geis, 1970), and lacking empathy and emotional intelligence (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009), Machiavellian individuals can be fairly poor and insensitive parents with parenting habits that might even contain elements of neglect and/or abuse. This speculation is evidenced by studies that found significant relationship between Machiavellianism, perceived family disengagement and chaos (Láng & Birkás, 2014) and recalled parental rejection (Kraut & Price, 1976; Ojha, 2007; Rymshina, 2013). In the next section, to follow this line of reasoning, Machiavellianism is presented as a life history strategy formed by early environmental effects.

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1.2. Machiavellianism and Life-History Theory

Life-History Theory (LHT) is a mid-level evolutionary theory about resource allocation (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). According to LHT, personality traits are results of trade-offs in face of environmental challenges encountered in childhood (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009). According to Belsky's (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2011) evolutionary theory of socialization, infants' attachment styles are adaptive responses to parental care. Parental care is not only the most proximate environment of the infant, but parenting also mediates information about environmental conditions in general. Unpredictable conditions (e.g., poverty, low SES, marital stress) – mediated by harsh, insensitive, inconsistent parenting – produce fast life history strategies. These strategies – early maturation and more offspring with less investment, i.e., investing in the self – are adaptive under circumstances with high mortality risk, because at least some offspring might survive (Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009). According to Belsky (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2011) fast life history strategies are not only reflected by insecure attachment styles, early physical maturation, and reproductive strategies fostering short-term relationships, but also by personality characteristics. Although results are inconsistent, several studies (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason & Tost, 2010; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012) identified Machiavellian characteristics such as impulsivity, exploitativeness, selfishness, inability to delay gratification, and unrestricted sociosexuality as parts of this fast life strategy.

1.3. Machiavellianism and the effects of trauma

Besides the above presented assumptions on the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and Machiavellianism, trauma literature also contains elements that might be promising in linking Machiavellianism to childhood adversities. After traumatic events victims' representations of the world, self, and others become very similar to those of Machiavellian individuals. According to Janoff-Bulman (2010), three basic assumptions are shattered in victims of trauma: (i) the belief of invulnerability; (ii) perception of the world as meaningful; and (iii) the positive representation of self and others. Dismissing and fearful attachment (Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014), or the amoral, antisocial, and exploitative behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970; Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013) of Machiavellian individuals reflect their vulnerability or their defenses against it (for details see Discussion in Láng & Birkás, 2014). Their cynical view of human nature, their sensitivity (Christie & Geis, 1970), low self-esteem (Andreou, 2000), and low satisfaction with life (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010) also indicate that Machiavellian individuals have negative representations of the world and people dwelling in it – including themselves. Additionally, Herman (1997) also mentions loss of control over the world, others, and emotion regulation as a significant consequence of trauma. Machiavellian strategies might represent an attempt to regain this lost control in manipulating others (Christie & Geis, 1970).

2. Aims of the study, hypothesis

Given the above mentioned links between harsh, insensitive, Machiavellian parenting and Machiavellianism in offspring, and the similarities between the shattered assumption of trauma survivors and the representations of Machiavellian individuals, we formulated the following general hypothesis. Adults with more pronounced Machiavellian attitudes will report having more memories of childhood neglect and abuse. Without formulating a

particular hypothesis, we also investigated which forms of neglect and abuse are related to the different aspects of Machiavellianism.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedure

After giving their informed consent, 247 participants (141 female) completed the scales. Their average age was 32.38 years ($SD = 5.43$). More than half of the participants (52%) graduated from a university, and everyone had at least 8 years of formal education. Participants were recruited from the convenience sample of research assistants. Scales and demographic questions were completed in private.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Mach-IV Scale (Christie & Geis, 1970)

This 20-item self-report scale measures Machiavellian attitudes. The scale consists of three subscales: (i) Tactics subscale measures the willingness to deceive and exploit others for personal gain; (ii) Views subscale measures identification with a cynical world view; and (iii) Moral subscale measures ignorance of morality. Internal reliabilities for total score, Tactics, and Views subscales were acceptable ($.55 < \text{Cronbach } \alpha < .81$). Cronbach α for Moral subscale proved to be insufficient (.22), so this subscale was left out of further analyses.

3.2.2. Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (CATS; Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995)

CATS is a 38-item self-report measure of recollections of childhood psychological maltreatment. CATS has three subscales: (i) Neglect/Negative Home Atmosphere subscale refers to psychological maltreatment in the most general form including loneliness and neglect; (ii) Punishment subscale refers to rigid and unreasonable home codes and punishment; and (iii) Sexual Abuse subscale refers to direct and indirect forms of sexual mistreatment. Participants rated the frequency of adverse events from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Cronbach α s ranged between .54 and .90 for CATS total score and the three subscales.

3.3. Statistical analyses

For statistical analyses, we used SPSS 17.0 for Windows. Besides descriptive statistics, we used ANOVAs to test gender differences on the measured variables. Pearson's correlations and multiple linear regressions were used to reveal relationships between aspects of Machiavellianism and different forms of childhood adversities.

4. Results

ANOVAs revealed gender differences on several measured variables (Table 1). Men reported higher levels of Machiavellianism in general and more frequent use of Machiavellian interpersonal tactics. Women reported more frequent memories of psychological maltreatment in general and neglect.

To test the relationships between aspects of Machiavellianism and different forms of childhood psychological maltreatment, we used Pearson's correlations in the first step (Table 2). General Machiavellianism and Machiavellian interpersonal tactics were positively correlated to all measured facets of childhood psychological maltreatment, though in the case of punishment and sexual abuse the correlation should be regarded as unimportant. Cynical world view correlated significantly with CATS total score and neglect.

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