

Machiavellianism and Perceived Parental Bonding: Different Socialization Pathways for Men and Women

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Abstract Machiavellianism can be seen as a personality indicator of fast life history strategy. Unpredictable, harsh environmental conditions tend to produce fast strategies which are associated with earlier maturation, more offspring, but less investment in them. Men tend to benefit more from fast strategy than women. We investigated, to what extent parental bonding characteristics play a role in developing high-Mach personality traits. According to gender differences we attempt to differentiate possible pathways of socialisation for men and women with Machiavellian attitudes. 175 participants (69 females) were asked to report Machiavellian attitudes (Mach-IV) and perceived parental rearing practices (Short-EMBU). For women, moderate negative correlation was found between level of Machiavellianism and level of parental (both paternal and maternal) warmth. For men on the other hand, Machiavellian attitudes correlated negatively with paternal rejection and paternal overprotection. Our results indicated that the development of Machiavellian attitudes followed different patterns in men and women. Considering the source of the above mentioned gender difference, we speculate that women could be more sensitive to emotional closeness of both their parents, whereas men tend to be more affected by paternal feedback or the lack of thereof. Consequently, there are gender differences in pathways that lead from family experiences to Machiavellian attitudes.

Keywords: machiavellianism, life history theory, parental bonding, gender differences, socialization

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1. Introduction

Machiavellianism is a socially aversive personality trait that is characterized by manipulative interpersonal tactics, a cynical view of the world and others, and flexible and utilitarian morality [1]. Several studies have already investigated the relationship between childhood environment and Machiavellianism [2,3,4,5], but they either assumed no gender differences in this relation or eliminated the effect of gender in statistical analyses. In our study, we tested the relationship between Machiavellianism and perceived parental bonding separately for men and women.

1.1. Machiavellianism and Life History Theory

Life history theory (LHT) describes the differences in the amount of resources (material, bioenergetic, etc.) allocated for somatic effort (i.e., utilized for survival) and for reproductive effort (i.e., utilized for mating or parenting) [6,7]. According to LHT, personality traits are organized as adaptations to solve adaptive tasks in response to the stability or harshness of environmental (ecological and/or social) conditions encountered in childhood [8,9,10]. Depending on environmental conditions, different life history strategies can emerge: unpredictable conditions tend to produce *fast* strategies, while more predictable

environments may produce *slow* strategies [11]. *Fast* life history strategies are associated with earlier maturation and more offspring with less investment. Under unpredictable circumstances with high mortality risk, this strategy is adaptive, because it increases the probability of the production at least some surviving offspring. Alternatively, more predictable environmental conditions, with low mortality risk favour the formation of *slow* life history strategies, which are associated with maturation and reproduction at a later age and less offspring with more investment. This is adaptive, because the high quality of parental investment enables the offspring to obtain resources and status or long-term mates [12].

Recent findings have indicated that Machiavellianism, at least to some extent, could be seen as a personality indicator of a fast life history strategy. The characteristics of Machiavellian individuals, like diminished self-control [13,14], selfishness, inability to delay gratification [8] and exploitation [5] have been shown to be associated with fast life history strategy [15].

1.2. Machiavellianism and Parental Bonding

According to current studies, Machiavellian individuals might be sensitive to some socioecological conditions in childhood, and seeking immediate returns might be the result of these environmental features [3,5]. Insecure attachment is suggested to be one of these environmental

conditions. It may constitute important information that allows individuals to calibrate their life history strategies to present conditions. Dysfunctional parent-child relationships signal a stressful, harsh social environment, encouraging the adoption of a selfish, fast life history strategy. These stressful conditions are suggested to alter the person's attitudes toward life and by extension their personality traits [3]. From the Dark Triad personality features Machiavellianism is the most influenced by environmental factors [16], suggesting its sensitivity to differences in attachment and parental care. On the basis of insecure attachment Machiavellian attitudes can emerge, because it provides a protean and "whatever it takes" approach to life [17]. Mothers and fathers play different roles in a child's life and the quality of interactions with the parents have different effects on the development of personality features. Mothers are seen as more important than fathers in attachment [18], because in our culture they are the primary caregivers. In line with this view, lower quality of maternal care was linked to increase insecure attachment which was associated to higher scores on Machiavellianism [2]. In a recent study [4], we found that Machiavellian adolescents perceived their families more disengaged, more chaotic, less rigid, less cohesive, and less flexible. Individuals with pronounced Machiavellian attitudes also reported poorer family communication and less satisfaction with family life.

2. Aim of the Present Study

According to LHT and possible gender differences in perceived parental care, the aim of our study was to identify the features of parental bonding, which could have significant effect on the development of Machiavellian attitudes. Since Machiavellianism is seen as an indicator for fast life strategy and this strategy has different output for women and men, we also assumed that male and female Machiavellians are sensitive for different cues of parental behaviour.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and Procedure

Our community sample consisted of 175 participants (69 females). They were between 23 and 58 years of age ($M = 32.23$; $SD = 6.73$). Most of the sample (89.7 %) had 12+ years of formal education. Research assistants distributed the link for an online survey at SurveyMonkey. The survey consisted of demographic questions and measures presented later. Before entering the study, participants gave their informed consent. They received no reward for participation.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Mach-IV Scale

Mach-IV Scale [1] is a 20-item self-report scale that measures Machiavellian attitude. This Machiavellian attitude consists of cynical world view, ignorance of morality, and deception and exploitation of others for personal gain. Although there are several different methods

to compute subscales from responses (Fehr et al., 1992; Corral & Calvete, 2000), we used the scale as a one-dimensional measure. CFA confirmed this solution ($\chi^2_{(150)} = 208.68$, $p < .005$; $TLI = .89$; $CFI = .92$; $RMSEA = .047$ [$CI = .031 - .062$]).

3.2.2. Short-EMBU (Swedish Acronym for Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran [My Memories of Upbringing])

Short-EMBU [19] (s-EMBU) is a 23-item self-report, retrospective measure of perceived parental rearing practices. The inventory consists of three scales. Statements belonging to each scale are evaluated on a 4-point Likert scale with respect to mother and father. Seven items measure parental rejection (e.g. 'My parents criticized me and told me how lazy and useless I was in front of others'). For data analyses, only six out of seven items were used, since the seventh item refers to parental preference for sibling, and this item is irrelevant for single daughters and sons. Six items measure parental emotional warmth (e.g. 'I felt that warmth and tenderness existed between me and my parents'). The remaining 10 items measure parental overprotection (e.g. 'I think that my parents' anxiety that something might happen to me was exaggerated').

3.3. Statistical Analyses

Besides computing descriptive statistics, we used independent samples t-tests to test gender differences on the measured variables. To avoid harmful multicollinearity between the strongly correlated perceived maternal and paternal rearing practices scales, we tested the relationship between Mach-IV scores and scales of s-EMBU with Pearson's correlations.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's α for the measured variables are presented in Table 1. Internal reliability was acceptable for all scales. Next, we used independent samples t-tests to detect gender differences on the measured variables (Table 2). Women reported higher scores on Machiavellianism and perceived emotional warmth from both parents (only marginally significant for mother). Men reported that they perceived both of their parents to be more rejecting.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and internal reliability indices for the measured variables (N = 175)

	Range	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Machiavellianism	58-125	94.00	13.43	.78
Paternal rejection	6-30	18.16	7.93	.79
Paternal emotional warmth	7-24	16.76	3.13	.74
Paternal Overprotection	10-29	20.45	4.34	.70
Maternal rejection	6-27	15.21	6.31	.78
Maternal emotional warmth	7-24	16.98	3.45	.75
Maternal overprotection	10-29	20.82	3.81	.76

With regard to the above mentioned gender differences, relationships between Mach-IV and s-EMBU scales were tested with Pearson's correlations separately for men and women (Table 3). For men, Machiavellianism scores correlated negatively with parental rejection and parental overprotection. So, men who perceived their fathers as

less rejecting and less overprotective were more likely to be characterized with Machiavellian traits. For women, Machiavellianism scores correlated negatively with paternal and maternal emotional warmth. So, women who perceived

their fathers or their mothers as providing less emotional warmth endorsed a more pronounced Machiavellian attitude.

Table 2. Gender differences on the measured variables; results of independent samples t-tests (df = 173 for all tests)

	Men (N = 106)		Women (N = 69)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Machiavellianism	91,94	13,84	97,16	12,21	- 2.550	< .05
Paternal rejection	19,88	7,50	15,52	7,90	3.676	< .001
Paternal emotional warmth	16,37	2,84	17,36	3,46	-2.074	< .05
Paternal Overprotection	20,75	4,28	19,99	4,42	1.147	= .253
Maternal rejection	16,45	6,21	13,30	6,03	3.316	< .005
Maternal emotional warmth	16,60	3,33	17,57	3,57	- 1.814	= .074
Maternal overprotection	21,20	3,77	20,25	3,83	1.622	= .107

Table 3. Pearson’s correlations between Machiavellianism and scales of perceived parental rearing practices for men (N = 106) and women (N=69; in bold)

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Machiavellianism	-.327** .085	-.008 -.335**	-.250** .056	-.188 .048	.025 -.266*	-.053 .073
2. Paternal rejection	--	-.458** -.408**	.502** .615**	.883** .929**	-.261** -.453**	.514** .577**
3. Paternal emotional warmth		--	-.040 -.332**	-.506** -.423**	.601** .759**	-.105 -.301*
4. Paternal Overprotection			--	.461** .625**	-.165 -.504**	.614** .680**
5. Maternal rejection				--	-.254** -.451**	.525** .636**
6. Maternal emotional warmth					--	.046 -.283*
7. Maternal overprotection						--

Note: * p < .05; ** p ≤ .01.

5. Discussion

In line with our predictions, our results indicated that parental bonding experiences could have an impact on developing Machiavellian attitudes and these experiences are different for men and women. Additionally, we demonstrated, that not just quality of parental care, but the sex of the parent was also important in that process. For men, less rejection and less overprotection from father were linked to Machiavellian attitudes, whereas for women, lack of maternal and paternal emotional warmth influenced the formation of Machiavellianism. In the former case, less paternal rejection or overprotection may result in a fluctuating paternal behaviour, where rules or limits set by fathers are more undetermined (or more chaotic) [20]. Boys, if they perceive the control of the father as vague, may develop a more delinquent, manipulative, and selfish attitude and tend to influence the paternal reactions and level of control [21]. This can be an adaptive strategy in such families, where fathers have limited respect or limited control over rules and limits for their children, since boys can dynamically change their behaviour (being obedient or violating the rules) to gain access to familial/parental resources. For women, Machiavellian attitudes are formed in families, where parents are perceived as less warm, less emotional and less tender. Girls in those families may perceive their parents as less caring or they experience lower quality of parental support, thus, they develop more insecure attachment styles [18]. Dysfunctional parent–child relationship or lack of parental emotional feedback informs girls about less parental support, less access to familial resources. In

this stressful environment, young women may tend to develop more selfish and hostile attitudes wherewith they can better utilize the available resources.

These two explanations are in line with the predictions of Life History Theory and parental bonding characteristics described above [5,6,7,8,9]. However, our study has some limitations, which could have affected our results. First, fast life strategy and Machiavellian attitudes are more characteristic of men than of women [5,8]. Life history strategy itself could have affected the memories about parental reactions and caregiver behaviours, so the answers of men could have been more affected by this, which could have influenced the data. Second, it is unusual, that Machiavellian attitudes are more characteristic for women than men, thus, this difference might indicate an unbalanced or unusual sample. With respect to these limitations, hypothetical explanations suggested in the discussion should be investigated in detail by further research.

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