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Machiavellianism and Conscientiousness of Self and of Others

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors in Psychology

By

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Amy Hackney and Dr. Nicholas Holtzman

ABSTRACT

As a dark personality, Machiavellianism (MACH) includes callousness and deceit; however, individuals higher in MACH differ from other dark personalities in their strategic long-term orientation to manipulate others to achieve personal success, and their cynical world views towards others. To measure different aspects of personality, research has developed an assessment called the Big Five Inventory. One factor included in the five attributes is (high) conscientiousness: the tendency to be careful towards others, organized, and not impulsive. Such traits seem to support the strategic aspect of the MACH personality but do not support the lack of care that individuals higher in MACH display towards others. These contradictions are observed in both past and recent research, and such discrepancies could imply that the term of conscientiousness is too broad and needs further specification. The current study hopes to further specify the term conscientiousness in relation to MACH by measuring both the personal and interpersonal aspects of conscientiousness. We predicted that MACH will be positively correlated with conscientiousness for self, negatively correlated with conscientiousness for others, and that the two dependent correlations will be significant different from each other. The results generally support the prediction, with a moderate, positive relation between MACH and conscientiousness for self, no relation between MACH and conscientiousness for others, and a significant difference between the two dependent correlations. These findings are beneficial for further defining conscientiousness and establishing further distinction within MACH. To our knowledge this is the first study to examine such relationships.

Keywords: Machiavellianism, Conscientiousness, Dark Personalities, Big Five Inventory

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Machiavellianism and Conscientiousness of Self and of Others

Within personality psychology, there are certain personalities that can deviate from social normative actions and beliefs. Past research has grouped the three personalities of Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism into what is titled: The Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). What unifies all three, and with more recent study a possible fourth in the personality of Sadism (Paulhus et.,al 2021), is a shared social malevolent character, manipulative tactics, and callous perceptions (Figueredo & Jones, 2013). The multiple character traits can be expressed in behaviors and tendencies to promote self, manipulate others, emotional coldness, aggressiveness, and duplicity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). From the traits, certain personalities may have emotional difficulties with interpersonal issues, and a heightened perception and preservation of self. The purpose of the current study is to better understand how Machiavellianism relates to the personality trait of conscientiousness.

Machiavellianism

Of the dark personalities, the Machiavellian personality (MACH) is of interest in the current study. Sharing traits presented in all members of the Dark Triad, the personality deviates from socially normative, or socially accepted behaviors and perceptions (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The title of the personality is based on the infamous writings of Niccolo Machiavelli and with more recent research also based on the writings of Sun Tzu (Christie & Geis 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009). People high in MACH follow

the voice of the two authors in how they are defined as individuals who make long-term strategies that involve planning and flexibility to achieve their own personal ambitions through deceptive and manipulative means (Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Vleeming, 1979). Logically, such motives could cause MACHs to have interpersonal issues with considering others in that they often only look after themselves. However, despite the more maladaptive traits, MACHs do not express overt aggression. Instead, past research supports that the personality prefers more emotionally manipulative behaviors such as lying, cheating, stealing or manipulating (Harrell & Hartnagel 1976; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Sakalaki, Richardson & Thepaut, 2007). From the research, their deviance seems to have a strategic nature and suggests that the personality understands the social consequences of overt aggression and plans against repercussions that could negatively impact their personal success. Overall, the findings split the personality into two dimensions. One dimension is related to their perception and preservation of self, and the other dimension is related to their cynical perception of others.

MACH and Personal Attributes

Within their own goals and desire to benefit themselves, MACHs express drive to succeed, self-reliance, and a detailed orientation towards efficiency. Such attributes have been documented in past research supporting that MACHs are associated with proactive career ambitions and better career adaptability (Cui & Zhang, 2021). Their focus on success is evident and they react strategically to attain their goals. On the more maladaptive side of their career behaviors, MACHs have also been found to lie to maximize their own benefits ahead of their partners (Sakalaki, Richardson, & Thepaut, 2007). The findings further support the manipulative traits that define MACHs as well as

their lust for power. MACHs have also been found to be observant and can be predicted by their ability to determine the efficacy of activities (Kowalshi et al., 2018). Such assessment skills allow MACHs to excel towards their own goals at a faster rate, and again displays their propensity towards self-attained success and strategy. Overall, MACHs seem very considerate and careful with their own ambitions.

Machiavellianism and Interpersonal Attributes

While MACHs care for themselves, they lack concern for others. For example, research has found that individuals high in MACH are more likely to steal despite having a personal relation with their victim; they have a tendency to manipulatively lie instead of trusting others, and they have an overall distrust of others (Harrell & Hartnagel, 1976; Kowalshi et al., 2018; Sakalaki, Richardson & Thepaut, 2007). Even in the circumstances where interpersonal empathy could gain power, such as publicly giving to charities to gain social support, MACHs still express little interpersonal concern and comprise their ability to gain social acceptance in favor of selfishness (Bereczkei et al., 2010). Such lack of concern for others contrasts with MACHs heightened concern for self, but also supports the defining traits of the personality.

MACH and Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness (CON), emerging during childhood (Eisenburg et al., 2014), is one of the five fundamental categories presented on the Big Five Personality Inventory, and can be defined as the ability to be careful and organized (BFI; Soto & John, 2017). In relation to MACH, past research has reported MACHs as scoring low on CON (Monaghan et al., 2020; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Such findings are not congruent to the theorized strategic and organized nature of MACHs. However, contradictory

research, in developing new measures of MACH, has supported a positive relation between CON and MACH (Collison et al., 2018). The discrepancies point to the further specification of the measure of CON. The concept of further defining CON has been investigated by Roberts and colleagues (2009) through splitting the measure into three more specific domains of orderliness and strategy, and three domains involving interpersonal connections such as keeping promises and caring for social rules. Through the six separate measures of CON, the two sides of distinction display how MACH could have conflicting results as they may have CON for self, but do not have CON for others. Based on such speculations, the discrepancies could explain the counterintuitive outcome of MACHs scoring lower on CON despite having defining characteristics of strategy.

Current Study

This study seeks to examine such discrepancies by analyzing both sides of CON and how they relate to MACH. To do so, we took the original questions presented in the BFI-2-S (*i.e.*, “*Tends to be disorganized*”) and rewrote them into questions about the self (*i.e.*, “*Tends to be disorganized with personal stuff*”) and questions about others (*i.e.*, “*tend to be disorganized with other people’s stuff*”). We aim to address both conscientiousness for self and conscientious for others through specifying the measure of conscientiousness and its relation to MACH. More specifically, we hypothesize that (a) higher MACH would positively relate to CON about self, (b) that MACH would negatively relate with conscientiousness of others, and (c) that the two correlations significantly differ.

Method

Participants

Study participants were undergraduates at Georgia Southern University who voluntarily chose to participate via an online recruitment tool and met the requirement of being eighteen years of age or older. Data from 469 participants were collected with 24.6% identifying as male, 73.1% female, 1.5% non-binary, 0.4% other, and a total average mean age of 19.87. From the demographic data, 27.1% identified as African American/Black, 0.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5.9% biracial, 64.8% European American or White, 0.2% Native American or American Indian, 0.4% Middle Eastern or North African, and 1.7% other. Ethnicity was also rated with 85.7% non-Hispanic or Non-Latinx, and 10.9% Hispanic or Latinx. Surveys were answered anonymously with participants agreeing to a consent form before attempting the study.

Procedure

Students signed up to take the study through the online recruitment SONA system, in which they could receive 0.5 course credits for participation. Participants then activated a link which connected to a Qualtrics Survey via online. The survey started out with an informed consent, which participants had to agree with to proceed to the study. They were then encouraged to take the study seriously through an encouragement section. Then participants took the survey portion of the study. The surveys included: the SD4, the FFMI, Conscientiousness for self, Conscientiousness for others, and the BFI2. All surveys were presented in random order and the items within each survey were also randomized. Afterward participants answered the demographic questions of gender, age and race, and then were debriefed. The debriefing included information on how to receive credit, and further resources on the subject of interest. Afterward, the study was pre-registered before the data were analyzed, the data were cleaned for insufficient effort

through set criteria, and each scale was tested for reliability. The study was a correlational study.

Measures

The Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus, et al., 2021)

A twenty-eight-item scale that assesses levels of the Dark Tetrad: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Sadism. The items are placed into four sections that correlate with each of the four personalities with seven items per personality (*i.e.*, “*It is not wise to let other people know your secrets*” and “*I like to show off every now and then*”). The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the original sub-scales was .80 for Narcissism, .75 for Mach, .81 for psychopathy, .81 for sadism. For our current study we found a Cronbach’s alpha of .88 for Machiavellianism.

The Five Factor Machiavellian Inventory (FFMI; Collison et al., 2018)

A fifty-two-item scale that measures the varying levels of Machiavellianism (*i.e.*, “*I am not an ambitious person*” and “*Humility is overrated*”). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The Cronbach’s alpha for the original scale ranged from .68 to .82 with the average being around .76, and our current study had an alpha of .77.

Big Five Short Inventory 2 (BFI-2-S: Soto & John, 2017)

A thirty-item scale divided into five sections of extroversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and conscientiousness (*i.e.*, “*Tends to be quiet*” and “*Is full of*

energy”). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale from *Disagree Strongly* to *Agree Strongly*. The Cronbach’s alpha original scale reliability ranged from 0.73 to 0.83 with the average being .77 and our current study had an alpha of .66.

“Conscientiousness For Self” and “Conscientiousness For Others”

Composed using the conscientiousness items from the most current Big Five Inventory 2 sixty-item Scale (Soto & John, 2017 (BFI2)), each item was modified slightly through the changing of the view of the question to either a personal or an interpersonal perspective (*i.e.*, “*Tend to be disorganized with personal stuff*” and “*Tends to be disorganized with other people’s stuff*”). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Our Cronbach’s Alpha for Conscientiousness for Self was .88, and Conscientiousness for Others was .87.

Statistical Analysis Overview

The study includes two sets of participants with one set having a total of 469 participants and the other 406 participants. The 406-participant group was selected for this current study due to it being stricter in criteria. The criterion of insufficient effort was established through an analysis of (a) fully completing the study, and (b) adequate response time. A time of 540 seconds was established as the time criterion and was a one tailed exclusion excluding only those who were too fast (Curran, 2016). The criterion of 540 seconds was based upon a small pilot sample of participants who were tasked with completing the study as a “good” participant – a participant who reads each question and the answer choices before proceeding to the next question. Five hundred and forty seconds was the mean response time of the pilot participants. Statistical analyses were

run through the SPSS and R program languages. We standardized the measures of MACH, the seven MACH items from the SD4 and all the items of the FFMI, through converting the scores into z-scores and averaging the z-scores. A bivariate correlation using Pearson's r was used to analyze the relation between MACH levels in relation to conscientiousness for self, and MACH levels in relation to conscientiousness for others. After standardization and running correlations, we used Steiger's Z to compare the two dependent correlations (Steiger, 1980).

Results

The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. MACH average was positively related to conscientiousness for self $r(404) = 0.39, p < .001$; and MACH had no relation to conscientiousness for others $r(404) = 0.06, p = .102$. Using Steiger's z -test (Steiger, 1980), the correlations between MACH and conscientiousness for self were found to be significantly greater than the correlation between MACH and conscientiousness for others $t(404) = 6.45, p < .001$ (Table 1).

Table 1*Descriptive statistics of participants who met 540 second criterion*

	N	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Conscientiousness for self	410	3.61	.78	.88
Conscientiousness for others	411	4.19	.57	.86
BFI-2-S	410	3.51	.74	.75
SD4				.76
FFMI				.79
MACH average	406	-.0004	.28	

Note: The BFI-2-S only included the twelve items for conscientiousness. Additionally, the SD4 only included the seven MACH items.

We also analyzed the correlations of MACH and conscientiousness within gender and found that the correlations held for both women $t(295) = 4.9, p < .001$ and men $t(99) = 2.86, p < .0052$ (See Table 2). The results of gender further support the original findings and establishes that the findings were not dictated by the differing genders within the sample, with most of the participants identifying as female.

Table 2*Descriptive statistics of gender*

	Women (n = 300)			Men (n = 102)		
	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Conscientiousness for self	3.60	.80	.83	3.66	.70	.79
Conscientiousness for Others	4.23	.57	.80	4.04	.54	.76
BFI-2-S	3.53	.75	.76	3.49	.70	.73
FFMI			.78			.81
SD4			.77			
MACH Average	-.03	.27		.12	.29	

Note: The BFI-2-S only included the twelve items for conscientiousness. Additionally, the SD4 only included the seven MACH items.

Discussion

Past and recent research has presented conflicting results on how Machiavellianism (MACH) is related to conscientiousness (CON). Some research supports that individuals higher in MACH score lower on CON and other research finds that individuals higher in MACH score higher on CON. We sought to investigate such discrepancies through assessing and modifying items that measured CON. We accomplished this by creating items for two types of conscientiousness and found the items to be reliable: CON for Self and CON for Others. The results generally supported our predictions in that MACH positively related to CON for self, and MACH did not relate to CON for others. Results also supported that the correlations of the two conditions significantly differed.

Additionally, the findings were found to be consistent over the factor of gender. Such findings display how MACHs place care and strategy into their own ambitions, but do

not place care or strategy into others. Additionally, the findings supporting the relationship across gender display that gender was not a defining factor of the relation between Machiavellianism and conscientiousness. Such findings could be further examined to inform any gender stereotypes as they relate to MACH and CON.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings could have further implications in the clinical setting of personality psychology. The results are of a basic research nature; however, it could be the foundation to further research assessing MACH and developing better interventions to reduce the maladaptive traits of MACH. Past research supports that though the Dark Triad share certain qualities, each personality is categorized due to differing and unique traits (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). If conscientiousness has multiple domains that relate to unique traits of MACH, then further study of the differences of conscientiousness among the Dark Triad could provide a more efficient assessment of the types of Dark personalities. Additionally, with more interventions focusing on either indirect or direct treatment of personality disorders (Hudson, 2021; 2023), further understanding the complexities of conscientiousness and how it relates to MACH could be a foundational step in developing innovative interventions to help reduce the maladaptive personality traits.

Further study is needed to investigate the relation between MACH and CON to replicate the current study's findings. Further study should also be implemented to investigate if the relation between MACH and CON can assist in the development of personality trait interventions to help reduce maladaptive traits.

Limitations

Further study with more diverse communities is also needed to account for the limitations of age and education since the participants of this study were a convenience sample consisting of only undergraduate students. Additionally, there was also the limitation of insufficient responding. In the initial data collection, we received responses from 494 participants. However, due to cleaning the data for insufficient responses we only accepted the data from 406 participants for hypothesis testing. Such an exclusion could signify a limitation with using online data collection as it could produce more insufficient responses than having collected data in person. Future study would need to consider and investigate such limits of online data collection.

Conclusions

Overall, this correlational study found that individuals higher in Machiavellianism have higher levels of conscientiousness for themselves compared to their levels of conscientiousness for others. Individuals higher in Machiavellianism score higher in conscientiousness for the self, but we observed no relation between Machiavellianism and conscientiousness for others. This finding will help to refine the measure of conscientiousness as it relates to assessing the dark personality trait of Machiavellianism.

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Appendix

Figure 1A

Measure of Conscientiousness for Self and Others item questions

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree strongly	Disagree a little	Neutral; no opinion	Agree a little	Agree strongly
Conscientiousness for self I am someone who...			Conscientiousness for others I am someone who...	
1. ___ Tends to be disorganized with personal stuff. 2. ___ Tends to be lazy when efforts should be made toward self-improvement. 3. ___ Is dependable, steady for one's own good. 4. ___ Is systematic, likes to keep things in order for personal stuff. 5. ___ Has difficulty getting started on tasks when they would help in personal efforts. 6. ___ Can be somewhat careless about activities that would be personally beneficial. 7. ___ Keeps things neat and tidy with personal belongings. 8. ___ Is efficient, gets things done for personal interests. 9. ___ Is reliable, can be counted on for completing tasks relevant to personal goals. 10. ___ Leaves a mess, doesn't clean up in personal space. 11. ___ Is persistent, works until the task is done, at least when it counts for personal reasons. 12. ___ Sometimes behaves irresponsibly on activities that would be personally helpful			1. ___ Tends to be disorganized with other people's stuff. 2. ___ Tends to be lazy when helping others is the goal. 3. ___ Is dependable, steady on behalf of other people's wellness. 4. ___ Is systematic, likes to keep things in order for other people. 5. ___ Has difficulty getting started on tasks when those tasks would help other people. 6. ___ Can be somewhat careless about activities that would be beneficial to other people. 7. ___ Keeps things neat and tidy for other people. 8. ___ Is efficient, gets things done for the betterment of others. 9. ___ Is reliable, can be counted on for completing tasks relevant to other people. 10. ___ Leaves a mess, doesn't clean up in other people's space. 11. ___ Is persistent, works until the task is done, at least when it counts in helping others. 12. ___ Sometimes behaves irresponsibly on activities that would help other people.	

Note: Questions were constructed through the modification of the 12 conscientiousness items of the BFI-2-S (Soto & John, 2017).