

2-20-1998

Research on Machiavellianism: Are Political Psychologists Machiavellian Enough?

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>



Part of the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1998) "Research on Machiavellianism: Are Political Psychologists Machiavellian Enough?," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 7 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss7/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Research on Machiavellianism: Are Political Psychologists Machiavellian Enough?

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 7

Date: 1998-02-20

Keywords: Construct, Machiavellianism, Typology

Abstract. This article provides a commentary on the thirty years of psychological research addressing the construct of Machiavellianism. Research failings may have much to do with the psychological characteristics of those who conceptualize, design, implement, and interpret Machiavellian studies.

The first significant psychological publication on Machiavellianism, *Studies in Machiavellianism* by Christie and Geis, sought to behaviorally differentiate individuals who more or less often endorsed statements developed from classic texts on political power. The face validity of these items seemed to suggest a proclivity to manipulate or exploit other people to achieve one's own objectives--without some due regard for the consequences for or the objectives of others. Would the face validity of item content stand up to the behavioral analysis of individuals who qualitatively and quantitatively differed as to item endorsement? The political consequences of this research could be quite significant encompassing selection and training procedures for political operatives, operational codes for elite decisionmakers, personnel security and counterintelligence applications for security bureaucracies, and even higher social and political status for successful researchers on Machiavellianism.

But the political consequences have not been significant due to a number of research failings. (1) The psychological trailblazers on Machiavellianism misinterpreted the classic political texts from which their inspiration and text items stemmed. As an example, the advice of Machiavelli in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* is often situationally specific and often involves behaviors that seem conversely related to intent and that seem structurally benign but functionally exploitative. Yet psychological research seems to treat Machiavellian statements as transcending situations and Machiavellian behaviors as intrinsically Machiavellian irrespective of intent or function. Moreover, Machiavelli did not lead his own life consonant with the common psychological interpretations of his texts and his at best modest life success seems less than was expected by the lay and professional psychologies of Machiavellianism prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the heuristics with which the trailblazers created their studies were likely flawed. (2) Virtually all researchers on Machiavellianism espoused the bias of naturalism towards social psychology. In other words, they advocated that the same variants of the scientific method that seemed valuable to the natural sciences would apply to the social sciences as well. However, the very human attributes of self-reflexiveness and reactance would seem to mitigate against finding natural laws of social behavior. This mitigation would be ever more salient with a construct like Machiavellianism that seemed to connote deceptive modifications of motive including the motive of deception. (3) As foreshadowed by (1) above, treating Machiavellianism as a personality variable with individual differences often impeded analysis of its multiple contexts--(a) evolutionary implications for social behavior, (b) political implications of creating a personality construct of individual differences to "explain" behavior with significant social and cultural aspects, and (c) social constructions of and exploitation by subjugating discourses. (4) As foreshadowed by (3) above, Machiavellianism was conceived as an intrapsychic state or trait as opposed to one of a number of adaptive behavioral strategies with the latter's success dependent on age, gender, or ingroup/outgroup salience. Cannot a higher probability of emitted behavior be demonstrated without the need for positing a corresponding psychological disposition? And if Machiavellianism is an intrapsychic disposition, can the construct be both a state or trait for the same individual independent of whether that individual varies on an

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

individual difference of "stateness" or "traitness?" (5) Machiavellianism has not been adequately related to a very basic political value-dichotomy between agentic and relational motives that seems to be salient across cultures and has been fervently explicated over a hundred years ago by the political philosopher/sociologist Fourier. (6) Individuals allegedly high in Machiavellianism have seemed to be more successful in time-limited interpersonal tasks, while those lower in Machiavellianism seem to be more successful in tasks encompassing longer periods of time. Yet most political leaders and political "players"--especially those considered exploitive--seem to desire long-term power. Paradoxically, anecdotal data suggest that individuals high in Machiavellianism may well develop and maintain long-term political power. Are the anecdotal data suspect? The experimental design and interpretation of naturalistic studies? Both? The whole conceptual tradition of Machiavellianism?

The construct of Machiavellianism may be less a personality feature than an example of false consciousness fostered by poorly understood economic, social, and cultural processes. Further study may result in necessary critical readings of the entire social science enterprise. (See Bakan, D. (1992). *The duality of human existence: Isolation and communion in Western man*. Free Association Press; Christie, R., & Geis, F. (1970). *Studies in Machiavellianism*. NY: Academic Press; Fourier, C. (1996). *The theory of the four movements*. Cambridge University Press. Original work published c. 1837; Shepperd, J.A., & Socherman, R.E. (1997). On the manipulative behavior of low Machiavellians: Feigning incompetence to "sandbag" an opponent. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1448-1459; Wilson, D.S., Near, D., & Miller, R.R. (1996). Machiavellianism: A synthesis of the evolutionary and psychological literatures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 285-299.) (Keywords: Construct, Machiavellianism, Typology.)