The Effects of Machiavellianism On Altruism, Empathy and Trust in College Students

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Abstract

This study analyzes the links between Machiavellian tendencies, altruism, empathy, and interpersonal trust among college students located in Coim- batore, India. We collected data from 200 undergraduate and graduate stu- dents at Rathinam College of Arts and Science using a correlational research methodology. The Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS), the Mach-IV Scale to gauge Machiavellian orientation, and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to assess multidimensional empathy—which includes traits like perspective- taking and empathetic concern—were among the evaluation instruments. The findings demonstrate a substantial negative association between Machi- avellianism and altruistic dispositions, as well as the emotional aspects of empathy, notably empathic concern. It's interesting to note that the findings point to a more nuanced connection with cognitive empathy (perspective- taking), which lends credence to the "cold empathy" theory, which holds that high Machs are capable of intellectual understanding of emotions with- out actually experiencing them. This study adds to the literature on Dark

Triad features within Indian higher education and proposes that teaching techniques centered on establishing trust and affective empathy might help lessen manipulative tendencies.

1. Introduction

Named for the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, the psychological concept of Machiavellianism denotes a personality trait characterized by inter- personal manipulation, a cynical contempt for morals, and an emphasis on self- interest and personal gain. It is part of the "Dark Triad" of personality, along with psychopathy and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Because college serves as a transitional environment where students develop the social ethics and interpersonal skills that will define their professional careers, it is essential to comprehend the impact of Machiavellian tendencies in higher education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of Machiavellianism on proso- cial variables, namely trust, empathy, and altruism, among college students at Rathinam College of Arts and Science in Coimbatore. While some recent evolu- tionary psychology perspectives suggest Machiavellianism might function as a specific life-history strategy rather than just a maladaptive trait (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), its impact on the social fabric of an academic community remains largely

detrimental, often eroding the trust necessary for collaborative learning.

Altruism, Empathy, and Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is operationally defined by the use of flattery and deceit to influence people for personal profit (Christie & Geis, 1970). Unlike psychopaths, who may behave impulsively, individuals with high Machiavellian tendencies ("High Machs") are frequently methodical, analytical, and capable of deferring gratification to pursue long-term goals. They frequently have a "availabilist"

viewpoint, seeing other people more as tools than as unique individuals.

Empathy isn't a single unified entity but a complex interplay of cognitive and affective processes. Davis (1980) developed a multimodal approach, assessed by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). This concept distinguishes between cognitive empathy (Perspective Taking)—the ability to logically grasp another's viewpoint—and affective empathy (Empathic Concern)—the emotional response of compassion to another's suffering. Literature shows a "Machiavellian Empa- thy Gap," where High Machs often demonstrate intact, or even superior, cogni- tive empathy, allowing them to "read" victims successfully and manipulate them (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). They are shielded from the emotional guilt that nor- mally prevents antisocial behavior, though, because they usually have severe deficiencies in affective empathy. This study tries to validate whether this dis- tinction holds true within the Indian student community.

Theoretically, Machiavellianism and altruism are incompatible. Altruism is defined as voluntary behavior meant to assist another without anticipation of external reward. High Machs may undertake "prosocial" deeds, but these are frequently instrumental—performed only when a future reward is expected, a practice termed as "reciprocal altruism." Furthermore, generalized trust is a ca- sualty of the Machiavellian worldview; High Machs tend to transfer their own manipulative tendencies onto others, leading to a cynical worldview that pre- vents true cooperation.

Review of Literature

According to earlier studies, Machiavellianism has a detrimental effect on college students' altruism, empathy, and trust. These effects frequently show themselves as emotional detachment, manipulative tendencies, and a decrease in prosocial actions. High Machiavellianism correlates with deficiencies in both cognitive and affective empathy, where individuals recognize others' emotions but lack true care or emotional resonance. This "high empathic response but low interest" trend arises in neurostructural research, linking Machiavellian tenden- cies to brain regions for affective processing despite indifference to others' well- being. College-aged samples suggest Machiavellians struggle with perspective- taking, inhibiting true interpersonal interactions. Machiavellians exhibit lesser levels of altruism, particularly when they are not seen, since they put their own interests ahead of those of others. This characteristic lowers prosocial responses and appreciation in student populations, which results in exploitative behav- iors and worse learning-related well-being. High-Mach students may pretend to be altruistic in public for the sake of their reputation, but in private, they may revert to selfishness, according to experimental results. Finally, Machiavellian- ism develops skepticism and lack trust in others' warmth or reliability,

nega- tively influencing relationship preferences and social support. Among young adults, it heightens perceived social exclusion and interpersonal distrust, exac- erbating loneliness and reduced cooperation. This distrust pattern coincides with broader Dark Triad impacts, diminishing relationship quality in educa- tional contexts.

Method

The study adopted a convenience sample strategy to recruit 200 participants from Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore. Undergraduate and graduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 made up the sample. The gen- der breakdown was somewhat balanced, with 52% female and 48% male partic- ipants. Exclusion criteria were students with a documented history of clinical personality disorders to ensure the study focused on sub-clinical trait variation. The 20-item Mach-IV Scale was used to measure Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970); high scores suggest a cynical view of human nature and a strong en- dorsement of deceptive tactics. The IRI was used to measure empathy, consist- ing of four subscales including Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern (Davis, 1980). The SRAS was applied to measure the frequency of altruistic acts on a 5- point scale (Rushton et al., 1981). Ethical permission was received from the De- partmental Review Board at the college. Participants were informed about the study's goal, given anonymity, and surveys were administered in a classroom environment during a specified activity hour.

Results

In line with normative statistics for college populations, the sample showed moderate levels of Machiavellianism ($M = 58.4$, $SD = 9.2$). MachIV scores and SRAS scores were shown to be significantly correlated negatively ($r = -.48$, $p <$ .001). This lends credence to the idea that people who exhibit more manipula-

tive tendencies also tend to be less charitable. Empathic Concern and empathy showed a significant negative connection ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$). However, the link with Perspective Taking was weak and non-significant ($r = -.09$, $p > .05$). This confirms the dissociation hypothesis: High Machs retain the cognitive abil- ity to understand people (Perspective Taking) but lack the emotional connection (Empathic Concern). A substantial negative connection was established between Machiavellianism and generalized trust ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$), indicating that high Machs see the world with distrust.

Discussion

The results provide empirical support for the Dark Triad's theoretical frame- work within the Indian cultural setting. The distinction between Machiavellian- ism and the sub-components of empathy may be the most important discovery. The lack of a substantial negative association with Perspective Taking shows that high Machs are not "blind" to the ideas of others. Rather, they may ex-ploit this cognitive awareness as a tool for manipulation. On the other hand, a "emotional detachment" is indicated by the substantial negative association with Empathic Concern. This separation permits high Machs to exploit

others without the inhibitory mechanism of remorse or shared misery. The substan- tial inverse relationship between Machiavellianism and trust reveals a cyclical feedback loop. High Machs distrust others, driving them to respond defensively or proactively aggressively, which in turn evokes negative reactions from peers, validating the Machiavellian's cynical worldview. Similarly, the low altruism ratings show that for High Machs, helping activity is perceived as a transaction rather than a virtue. This may show up as a lack of intellectual citizenship in a collegiate setting. For educators and psychologists at schools like Rathinam College, these findings suggest that character education programs should focus explicitly on affective development. High Machs may unintentionally become more adept manipulators if social skills (cognitive empathy) are only taught. In- terventions must focus on developing true emotional connection and commu- nity trust.

Conclusion

This study indicates that Machiavellianism is strongly and negatively linked with altruism, affective empathy, and trust among college students. The "Machi- avellian personality" functions on a deficit of emotional connection rather than a deficit of social knowledge. Early detection of these characteristics allows ed- ucators and clinical psychologists to better assist students' growth and create a school culture based on sincere collaboration rather than calculated manipulation.

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