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Machiavellianism in Parents and Their Children

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The role of the family in the development of Machiavellianism was examined in this study. High- and low-Machiavellian sixth graders played a bluffing game. Their parents completed Machiavellian belief measures. The Machiavellianism of fathers and mothers was positively related to their children's success at deceiving others but not at seeing through others' attempts at deception. In addition, fathers' Machiavellianism was positively related to their children's Machiavellian beliefs. These data support a modeling hypothesis for the development of Machiavellianism. Unexpectedly, the children's own behaviors and beliefs were unrelated. This pattern of results suggests that a child's manipulative behaviors and beliefs are learned separately and only become consistent over time.

Machiavellians lack concern with conventional morality, remain emotionally neutral in personal relationships, are uncommitted to ideological goals, and are both willing and successful in the manipulation of others (Christie & Geis, 1970). In an intriguing program of research, Christie and his colleagues have shown that college students and other adults, who believe that men are weak, cowardly, and easily subject to pressure from others and who advocate manipulative tactics such as guile and deceit in interpersonal relations, can successfully manipulate others in a variety of experimental settings.

At least two studies have demonstrated that a Machiavellian orientation can be measured in children as young as 11 years old and that children with this orientation are more successful at manipulating other children. Both Nachamie (1970) and Braginsky (1970a) developed simplified versions of Machiavellian personality scales. In Nachamie's research, sixth graders scoring higher on her Kiddie Mach scale were better able to distinguish between their opponents' lying and truth telling and, at the same time, make their own lying and truth telling less distinguishable when playing a bluffing game. Braginsky found that fifth graders scoring higher on her Machiavellian scale were more successful in persuading other children to eat quinine-flavored crackers and used different lying strategies to do so.

The existence of people with a Machiavellian belief system and parallel success in manipulating others has prompted both speculation and research on the origins of this personality trait. Two hypotheses have arisen concerning the role of the family in the development of this characteristic. According to the standard socialization hypothesis, which might be called a modeling or identification hypothesis, children, in trying to be like their parents, acquire the ideology and associated skills which their parents have used successfully to manipulate others, including themselves. The second possibility might be called a reciprocation or victim hypothesis in which children learn by doing, not copying. According to this hypothesis, manipulator and manipulated are role partners who develop or learn complementary sets of behaviors and beliefs in playing their respective parts. Thus, Christie and Geis (1970) argue that low-Machiavellian parents are most likely to succumb to interpersonal manipulation, and in doing so they reinforce their children's manipulative, Machiavellian behavior. Similarly, high-Machiavellian parents, in manipulating their children, teach them the role of the manipulated.

Most research supporting either hypothesis is flimsy because it is based on retrospective

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reports from adults about their parents' beliefs. Thus, both Guterman's (1970) findings supporting the modeling hypothesis and Tourney's (1973) failure to support it are suspect because the data were based on retrospective reports from adults. In addition, Tourney erroneously equates modeling and emotional identification and assumes that a child's modeling of his or her parents' behavior is contingent on good affective relations between them. Other research has shown that parental modeling and parent–child conflict can be coexisting causes of a child's behavior (cf. Kraut & Lewis, 1975). One cannot refute the modeling hypothesis by demonstrating that children and parents disliked each other. Indeed, with Machiavellianism, the reverse is likely to be true. Parents can best provide a model of emotional detachment for their children by being cold to them.

Only Braginsky's (1970b) study has eliminated the shortcomings associated with a reliance on offsprings' retrospective reporting of their parents' attitudes. Braginsky directly measured the Machiavellian attitudes of both parents and children, as well as the Machiavellian behavior of the children. She found virtually no relationship between parents' scores and their children's scores or behavior.

An unwarranted manipulation of Braginsky's (1970b) data allowed her to conclude that Machiavellianism of parents and their children is inversely related. She assumed that guileless low Machiavellians would score low both on the Mach V scale, which has been corrected for social desirability, and on the uncorrected Mach IV scale. On the other hand, truly high Machiavellians, because they try to present themselves favorably, would score high on the corrected Mach V scale but low on the uncorrected Mach IV scale. Recategorizing parents according to these assumptions produced an inverse relationship between parental and child Machiavellianism. However, one should question these assumptions for two reasons. First, they are inconsistent with the findings that, compared with low Machiavellians, highly Machiavellian individuals are more accurate and honest in their perceptions of themselves and others and tend to score lower on measures of social desirability (e.g., Geis & Levy, 1970). In addition, it contradicts a strong research tradition that treats the Mach IV and V scales as roughly equivalent and ignores the moderately high correlations typically found between the two.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the development of Machiavellianism by examining the relationship between parental and child Machiavellianism through a direct comparison of parents' and children's scores. In order to increase the comparability of this to earlier research, the methods used here replicate those of Nachamie (1970).

Method

Sample

The subjects were 53 sixth-grade students from a small central Pennsylvania town who completed the Kiddie Mach scale. On the basis of their scores, 36 students were selected to take part in a bluffing game. Parents of 36 students returned Machiavellian questionnaires (36 mothers and 32 fathers), including 28 mothers and 25 fathers of children chosen for the bluffing game.

Children's Machiavellian Orientation

Nachamie's Kiddie Mach scale was used to measure children's Machiavellian orientation (Christie & Geis, 1970, p. 327). This scale is a revision of the Mach IV scale with comprehensibility and content appropriate to sixth graders. Teachers administered it to students in their classrooms by reading it aloud while students read along silently. The Cronbach (1951) alpha reliability in the present sample of .48 is comparable to the split-half reliabilities in the .50s reported by Nachamie for this scale and split-half reliabilities in the low .40s for a similar scale reported by Braginsky (1970a).

Parental Machiavellian Orientation

Shortened versions of both the Mach IV and the social desirability corrected Mach V scales were used to measure parents' Machiavellian orientation. Both of these scales are based on the same set of 20 items, so in order to eliminate overlap in the present study, the shortened Mach IV scale was based on the 10 most discriminating items on the original Mach IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970, p. 17), and the shortened Mach V scale was based on the rest. The Mach V scale was scored according to recommendations by Rogers and Semin (1973). Christie and Geis report a split-half reliability of .79 for the original Mach IV scale and reliabilities in the .70s for the original Mach V scale. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the shortened Mach IV scale (.71 for mothers and .59 for fathers) were acceptably high, but those for the shortened Mach V scale (.19 for mothers and .34 for fathers)

were unacceptably low; therefore, the Mach V scale was omitted from further analysis.

Children's Success in Interpersonal Manipulation

The children's bluffing game developed by Nachamie was used to test the children's manipulative ability. In this game, children roll dice and win candy if they can fool their opponents about the outcome of the roll or see through their opponents' bluffs. The group of children was trichotomized on the basis of their Kiddie Mach scores, and high- and low-Machiavellian children of the same sex were paired. They faced each other across a table which was divided by a low barrier. Taking a total of 20 turns each, the players alternated tossing two dice, each of which had three light sides and three dark sides, but no dots. The barrier was positioned so that players could not see the dice after their opponents' rolls but could see each others' faces. The roller had the option of either lying or telling the truth about whether the upper surfaces of the dice were the same color or different. The payoff matrix encouraged successful bluffing. Five M & M candies were at stake if the roller lied and only two if he or she told the truth. The opponent could either accept or challenge the roller's claim. If the opponent was correct, he or she won the M & Ms; if the opponent was wrong, the roller won the candy. The children's score was the total number of M & Ms they had won by the end of the game.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 summarizes the results of this research. In general, the relationships among the manipulative orientations within a family are positive. The moderate, positive relationship between the Machiavellian scores of the two parents, $r(30) = .45$, $p < .05$, probably reflects both the role of similarity in partner selection (Byrne, 1971) and convergence over time (Newcomb, 1961).

More relevant are the low but significant positive correlations between the Machiavellian scores of each parent and the child's success in the bluffing game: for mothers, $r(26) = .34$, $p < .05$; for fathers, $r(23) = .37$, $p < .05$. Parents with Machiavellian beliefs had children who could manipulate others better. In addition, their children had more Machiavellian beliefs. There was a significant positive relationship between fathers' Machiavellian beliefs and those of their children, $r(30) = .34$, $p < .05$, but not between mothers' and their children's, $r(34) = -.02$, *ns*.

These data support the modeling-identification hypothesis about the development of a Machiavellian personality in one of the few studies that has measured the Machiavellian orientation of parents and children independently. Parental Machiavellianism is a predictor and perhaps a cause of children's Machiavellian beliefs and their manipulative success.

How might this personality trait be transmitted? According to Christie and Geis (1970), the Machiavellian syndrome is composed of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral components that are causally linked. Thus, Geis's rationale for creating the Con Game (Geis, 1970) was that

> a high Mach score indicates acceptance of Machiavellian attitudes (i.e., "in general, people are manipulable"), . . . [that] acceptance implies emo-

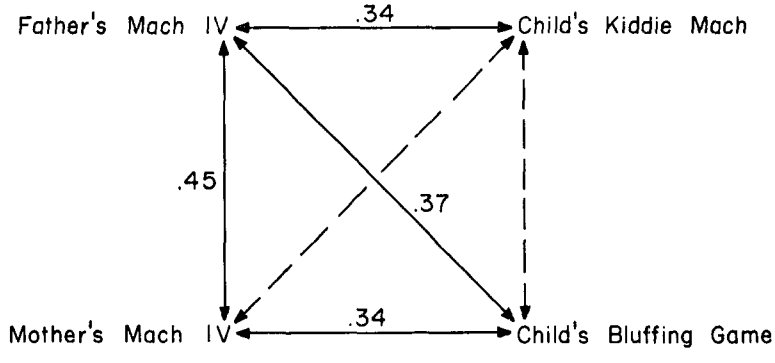

Figure 1. Pearson correlations between Machiavellianism in parents and their children. (Solid arrows indicate significant correlations, and broken arrows indicate correlations which did not differ significantly from zero.)

> tional detachment and amorality which lead to a willingness to practice interpersonal manipulation, and [that] practice leads to skill. (p. 107)

That is, beliefs lead to motivation which, in turn, leads to behavior.

A surprising finding in the present study requires modification of Christie and Geis's causal hypothesis. Although the correlations between the parents' Machiavellian beliefs and their children's Machiavellian beliefs and behavior were consistently positive, the children's own Kiddie Mach score did not correlate with their success in the bluffing game, $r(36) = -.11$, *ns*. This pattern of results suggests that children's beliefs and behaviors are learned separately, and consistency between them occurs only over time. Some children learn a belief system from their parents which indirectly influences behavior, whereas others directly model their parents' successful manipulative techniques without previously adopting Machiavellian beliefs.[1]

The manipulative skills children learn may plausibly involve the ability to persuade others and to perceive others and their intentions accurately. These themes run through the literature on the Machiavellian personality. Most behavioral tests of Machiavellianism require these two skills for successful performance. For example, in the bluffing game used in this study, subjects were required to deceive an opponent and see through his or her attempts at deception. Successes at these two components were unrelated to each other, $r(34) = .20$, *ns*. Success at deception correlated with parental Machiavellianism: for mothers, $r(26) = .30$, $p < .10$; for fathers, $r(25) = .37$, $p < .05$. Accurate perception, however, did not correlate with parental Machiavellianism ($rs = .07$ and $-.05$ for mothers and fathers, respectively). Thus, children are probably learning persuasive, but not perceptual, skills from their parents.

This hypothesis is supported by the previous literature. Data consistently and clearly show that compared with low Machiavellians, high Machiavellians are especially able communicators and persuaders, regardless of the veracity of their message (e.g., Braginsky, 1970a; Exline, Thibaut, Hickey, & Gumpert, 1970; Geis, Christie, & Nelson, 1970; Novielli, 1970). Less consistent data suggest that high Machiavellians are not accurate in assessing characteristics of particular others (e.g., Christie & Boehm, 1970; Danielian, 1970; Geis & Leventhal, 1970; Geis & Levy, 1970; Novielli, 1970). This is to be expected if they are learning these skills from their parents. When any persuasive communicator is being convincing and appearing truthful, he or she demonstrates by example persuasive techniques to his or her audience. But at the same time the communicator provides the audience with the very difficult perceptual discrimination task of distinguishing truth from lie when everything sounds truthful. Therefore, by being persuasive, high-Machiavellian parents should increase their child's persuasiveness but not increase the child's ability to perceive others accurately.

Even if children independently learn Machiavellian beliefs and behaviors from their parents, over time the beliefs and behaviors may converge, producing the consistency typically seen in adults. The convergence may be for either external, modeling, or internal cognitive consistency reasons. First, to the extent their parents' beliefs and behaviors are internally consistent, the children's should also become consistent as they gradually adopt their parents' beliefs and behaviors. Alternately, children may adopt their parents' beliefs or behaviors and generate the other component on their own. For example, they might generate an appropriate set of beliefs to justify or dispassionately describe their parentlike behavior or learn manipulative skill through trial and error while trying to act on the borrowed belief.

Whatever the exact sequence of causation, these data suggesting separate but parallel development of belief and behavior systems

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[1] The lack of a relationship is inconsistent with Nachamie's results, whose procedures were replicated here, as well as Braginsky's. Negative results are traditionally suspect in social psychology and are often attributed to methodological errors. Here they may have occurred because of the low reliabilities of both the Kiddie Mach scale and the bluffing game. However, the positive correlations of each of these to the parental measures argue against this possibility and for treating the negative result as meaningful.

are consistent with a growing literature on the independence of both attitudes and behavior (e.g., Abelson, 1972; Wicker, 1969) and personality scales and behavior (e.g., Mischel, 1968). If beliefs and behavior develop separately, we should not expect identical stimuli to elicit them. Further research not necessarily restricted to Machiavellianism is needed to determine if the independent development of attitudes and behavior is the appropriate explanation for the present data and a factor contributing to the weak consistency between attitudes and behavior generally.

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