

The Relationship between Machiavellianism and Moral Behavior among University Students in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between Machiavellianism and moral behavior among university students in Pakistan. A correlational research design was used with a convenience sample of 300 university students (146 male, 154 female) drawn from universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Participants completed the Machiavellian Personality Scale (Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009) and the Moral Behavior Inventory (Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005). Data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation and independent-samples t-tests in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Results revealed a significant negative correlation between Machiavellianism and moral behavior, $r(298) = -.133, p < .05$, indicating that students with stronger Machiavellian tendencies reported comparatively lower moral behavioral standards. No significant gender difference emerged for Machiavellianism, although female students scored significantly higher than male students on moral behavior. These findings are consistent with international research linking Machiavellian personality traits to reduced ethical sensitivity and extend this evidence to a non-Western, collectivist academic setting. Implications for character education and ethics training in higher education are discussed.*

Keywords: Machiavellianism, moral behavior, university students, Pakistan

Introduction

Moral behavior, broadly defined as conduct consistent with ethical standards such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility, provides the foundation for trust and cooperation in social life (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bandura, 1991; Haidt, 2007). Because individuals frequently face situations in which self-interest and ethical obligation are in tension, the psychological

determinants of moral behavior have become an important focus within personality and social psychology (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

One personality trait consistently linked to manipulation and unethical conduct is Machiavellianism. Rooted in the political writings of Niccolò Machiavelli but adapted for psychological research by Christie and Geis (1970), Machiavellianism describes a tendency toward strategic manipulation, emotional detachment, and a pragmatic, self-serving approach to interpersonal relationships. Individuals high in this trait tend to view relationships instrumentally and treat morality as negotiable when it conflicts with personal gain.

Although Machiavellianism is widely associated with unethical behavior, the relationship is not perfectly consistent across individuals or situations (Castille, Buckner, & Thoroughgood, 2018); not every person with strong Machiavellian tendencies behaves unethically in every context (Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018). University students represent a particularly relevant population for examining this relationship, since the years of emerging adulthood (18-25) involve active identity development, growing independence, and frequent exposure to ethical dilemmas such as academic dishonesty and interpersonal competition (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Krou, Fong, & Hoff, 2021).

In Pakistan, a society that places high value on collectivism, social reputation, and interpersonal harmony, moral conduct is strongly shaped by cultural context (Hassan, Ali, & Bibi, 2021), while competitive academic environments simultaneously create pressures that can encourage self-serving behavior (Javed, Bhatti, & Rana, 2020). Most existing research on Machiavellianism and unethical behavior, however, has been conducted with Western samples and largely treats the relationship as direct and linear (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). Comparatively little work has examined this association among South Asian university students.

The present study therefore examines whether Machiavellianism is significantly related to moral behavior among university students in Pakistan, contributing culturally specific evidence to a literature that has so far been dominated by Western samples.

Literature Review

Machiavellianism. Christie and Geis (1970) introduced Machiavellianism into psychology through the Mach-IV scale, describing it as a cynical, pragmatic orientation toward human relationships in which manipulation is viewed as an acceptable route to personal goals. High-Machiavellian individuals tend to distrust others, engage in strategic impression management, and adopt a calculating, unemotional style in social interaction (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Bereczkei, 2017). As one of the three traits comprising the Dark Triad alongside narcissism and psychopathy, Machiavellianism is distinguished by long-term strategic planning rather than impulsive aggression (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

Machiavellianism and unethical behavior. A substantial body of research links Machiavellianism to unethical and antisocial conduct. Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño (2010), in a meta-analysis of workplace ethics research, identified Machiavellianism as one of the strongest individual-level predictors of unethical decision-making. In academic contexts specifically, Williams, Nathanson, and Paulhus (2010) found that Machiavellian students were

more likely to engage in cheating and to justify dishonest behavior as strategically necessary. Machiavellian individuals also tend to excuse inappropriate conduct more readily than their peers when it serves a personal advantage (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

At the same time, evidence suggests the relationship between Machiavellian traits and unethical behavior is not invariant. Individuals high in Machiavellianism may behave ethically when unethical conduct threatens their reputation or conflicts with values, they hold dear, consistent with Trait Activation Theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), which proposes that other psychological processes can regulate whether trait-based tendencies are expressed behaviorally (Belschak, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2018; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012).

Moral behavior. Moral behavior refers to conduct consistent with ethical principles such as honesty, fairness, and concern for others, and functions as social glue that sustains cooperation and trust (Haidt, 2007; Turiel, 1983). Rest's (1986) Four Component Model conceptualizes moral behavior as the product of moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. Bandura's (1991, 1999) Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency further proposes that moral conduct is regulated through internalized standards and anticipated self-sanctions such as guilt; however, individuals can disengage these internal controls through mechanisms such as moral justification and displacement of responsibility, allowing unethical actions to occur without a corresponding sense of guilt (Bandura, 1999, 2016).

In university settings, moral behavior manifests as academic honesty, fairness toward peers, and respect for institutional norms, while academic pressure simultaneously creates opportunities for dishonesty, plagiarism, and manipulation (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Stephens, 2017). Personality traits, including Machiavellianism, have repeatedly been shown to shape how students respond to these ethical pressures (Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006; Rettinger & Jordan, 2005).

Machiavellianism and moral behavior. Given that Machiavellian individuals characteristically prioritize self-interest and treat ethical norms as negotiable, a negative relationship between Machiavellianism and moral behavior is theoretically expected (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Empirically, Dahling, Whitaker, and Levy (2009) found that Machiavellianism correlated with greater dishonesty and rule-breaking, while Greenbaum, Mawritz, and Piccolo (2014) found that Machiavellian individuals were less inclined to adhere to moral principles in interpersonal dealings. Within Bandura's framework, Machiavellian tendencies can be understood partly through moral disengagement: cognitive strategies that deactivate the self-sanctions that would otherwise discourage unethical action (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012).

Despite this evidence, most studies examining Machiavellianism and moral behavior have relied on Western or organizational samples, leaving the relationship comparatively understudied among South Asian university populations, where collectivist norms and social reputation concerns may shape the expression of Machiavellian tendencies differently (Hassan et al., 2021). The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship in a sample of Pakistani university students.

Methodology

A cross-sectional, correlational research design was used to examine the relationship between Machiavellianism and moral behavior among university students.

Sample

Data were collected from 300 university students (146 male, 48.7%; 154 female, 51.3%) recruited through convenience sampling from various universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants ranged in age from 18 years upward and were drawn from a range of academic levels (76.7% undergraduate, 14.7% Master's, 6.7% MPhil, 2.0% PhD) and disciplines, including Social Sciences (26.3%), Medical/Health Sciences (26.7%), and Engineering/Technology (23.7%), among others.

Measures

Machiavellianism was assessed using the Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS; Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009), a 16-item self-report measure rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scale assesses four dimensions: amoral manipulation, desire for status, desire for control, and distrust of others, with higher total scores reflecting stronger Machiavellian tendencies. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency in prior research ($\alpha = .72-.84$) and returned a Cronbach's alpha of .78 in the present sample.

Moral behavior was measured using the Moral Behavior Inventory (MBI; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005), a 24-item measure in which participants rate everyday behaviors on a 4-point scale from 1 (not wrong) to 4 (strongly wrong). Higher total scores indicate stronger moral standards and greater sensitivity to ethically inappropriate conduct. The scale showed acceptable internal consistency in previous studies ($\alpha = .73-.85$) and yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .83 in this sample.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Ethical Review Committee prior to data collection. Participants were recruited voluntarily, provided informed consent, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were kept confidential. Data were collected through structured, in-person questionnaires, and standardized instruments were used with the permission of their original authors.

Results

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were computed for the study variables, and the relationship between Machiavellianism and moral behavior was examined using Pearson product-moment correlation. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences.

Table 1

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Machiavellianism and Moral Behavior (N = 300)

Variables	1	2
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1. Mach_T	–	-.133*
2. MB_T		–

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Note: MB_T = Moral Behavior Total; Mach_T = Machiavellianism Total.

As shown in Table 1, a statistically significant, negative correlation emerged between Machiavellianism and moral behavior, $r(298) = -.133$, $p < .05$. This indicates that students who scored higher on Machiavellianism tended to report comparatively lower moral behavioral standards, supporting the hypothesis that higher levels of Machiavellianism would be associated with lower moral behavior among university students.

Descriptively, scores on Machiavellianism ($M = 46.08$, $SD = 9.11$) and moral behavior ($M = 67.79$, $SD = 11.56$) fell in the moderate range of their respective potential scoring ranges. An independent-samples t -test further indicated no significant gender difference in Machiavellianism, $t(298) = 0.81$, $p = .41$, whereas female students ($M = 70.93$, $SD = 11.21$) scored significantly higher than male students ($M = 64.48$, $SD = 11.02$) on moral behavior, $t(298) = -5.02$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.58$.

Discussion

This study examined whether Machiavellianism is related to moral behavior among university students in Pakistan. As hypothesized, a significant negative correlation was found, indicating that students with stronger Machiavellian tendencies reported lower moral behavioral standards, reflecting reduced sensitivity to ethically questionable actions and greater tolerance of moral violations.

This finding is consistent with a substantial body of international research linking Machiavellianism to reduced morality and increased unethical conduct (Christie & Geis, 1970; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Machiavellian individuals characteristically treat morality as a negotiable barrier to personal goals rather than a binding constraint, and this orientation has been repeatedly shown to translate into greater willingness to cheat, deceive, or exploit others when doing so is advantageous (Williams et al., 2010). The present findings extend this pattern to a Pakistani university sample, suggesting that the adverse relationship between Machiavellianism and moral standards is not confined to Western, individualist contexts but also emerges within a collectivist academic environment (Hassan et al., 2021).

Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency offers a useful lens for interpreting this relationship. According to this framework, moral conduct is regulated through internalized standards and anticipated self-sanctions such as guilt or shame. Individuals high in Machiavellianism may be more prone to moral disengagement, the cognitive process through which self-sanctions are deactivated through mechanisms such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and displacement of responsibility (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012). By weakening these internal restraints, Machiavellian individuals may be able to act unethically with reduced guilt, resulting in the lower moral standards observed in this study.

It is worth noting that although statistically significant, the correlation observed here was modest in size. This suggests that Machiavellianism, while a meaningful predictor, is only

one of several factors shaping moral behavior; cognitive, social, and identity-related variables are also likely to play an important role, a possibility explored further in a companion analysis examining moral identity within this same sample.

No significant gender difference was found for Machiavellianism, consistent with recent meta-analytic evidence suggesting that gender differences in Machiavellian tendencies are inconsistent across contexts (O'Boyle et al., 2012), even though earlier work had suggested men might score higher (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Female students did, however, report significantly higher moral behavior than male students, echoing prior findings that link gender socialization to differences in moral concern and prosocial orientation (Gilligan, 1982; Eagly, 2013).

These findings carry practical implications for higher education institutions. Given the negative association between Machiavellianism and moral behavior, universities may benefit from integrating character education and ethics training into academic life rather than treating it as a standalone course, with particular attention to reducing the perceived payoff of manipulative or self-serving strategies in competitive academic settings (Bretag, 2016; McCabe et al., 2012).

Several limitations should be noted. The correlational design precludes causal conclusions, and the reliance on self-report measures raises the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly for a sensitive construct such as moral behavior. The convenience sample, drawn primarily from Islamabad and Rawalpindi and skewed toward undergraduate students, also limits generalizability. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, behavioral or peer-report measures of moral conduct, and broader sampling across Pakistan's diverse academic institutions.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that Machiavellianism is significantly and negatively related to moral behavior among Pakistani university students, extending a well-established international pattern to a previously understudied, non-Western academic population and underscoring the relevance of addressing manipulative personality tendencies within character education efforts in higher education.

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