



## Short Communication

## Borderline Personality Organization predicts Machiavellian interpersonal tactics



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the phenomenological (*e.g.*, manipulateness) and dynamic (*i.e.*, emotion dysregulation) analogies between Machiavellianism and Borderline Personality Organization (BPO), the relationship between these constructs has not yet been investigated. In our study, 225 non-clinical, non-student adults (130 females;  $32.33 \pm 5.42$  years of age on average) completed measures of BPO and Machiavellianism. Results showed that Machiavellian personality traits were positively correlated with fear of fusion, diffuse identity, and use of primitive defenses. Machiavellianism, in general, and Machiavellian interpersonal tactics were predicted by fear of fusion and use of primitive defenses. Results are discussed from the perspective of Life History Theory.

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## 1. Introduction

Both Machiavellianism and Borderline Personality Organization (BPO) are popular constructs for contemporary research in psychology. Despite similarities in behavioral characteristics (*e.g.*, manipulateness [Christie & Geis, 1970; Gunderson, 1984]), and common underlying processes (*e.g.*, emotion dysregulation [Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Kernberg, 1985]), the relationship between these two constructs has not yet been investigated. In our study, non-clinical, non-student adults completed measures of Machiavellianism and BPO.

Machiavellian individuals view others in a goal-oriented manner and tend to manipulate and exploit others; they see people “as a means to an end” (Ali et al., 2009; Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellianism is further characterized by a cynical, mistrustful attitude and impaired recognition and regulation of emotions (Ali et al., 2009; McIlwain, 2003). Machiavellianism is also linked to personality dysfunctions (Douglas, Bore, & Munro, 2012; McHoskey, 2001). However, Machiavellian individuals are successful in persuading others (Braginsky, 1970) or in solving social dilemmas (Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012). Among others, the simultaneous presence of vulnerability and success in Machiavellian individuals makes the phenomenon worthy of scientific study.

Kernberg (1985) has suggested using the term “borderline” as a level of personality organization. BPO is characterized by three distinctive features (Gunderson, 1984): *identity diffusion*, *primitive defenses*, and *vulnerable reality testing*. Kernberg (1985) further characterized BPO with nonspecific manifestations of *ego weakness* (lack of anxiety tolerance, lack of impulse control, and lack of developed sublimatory channels), a shift toward *primary process thinking*, *specific defensive operations* (*e.g.*, splitting, projective identification), and *pathological internalized object relations* (unstable ego boundaries).

Several studies have suggested that Machiavellianism and borderline features were linked either at the conceptual level (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Miller et al., 2010) or empirically in non-clinical samples (Douglas et al., 2012; McHoskey, 2001). Empirical studies using patients with Borderline Personality Disorder (Mandal & Kocur, 2013; Wischniewski & Brüne, 2013) showed mixed results. However, no previous studies have addressed the relationship between Machiavellianism and BPO.

Ego weakness – a characteristic feature of BPO – manifests itself in impaired emotion regulation (Ali et al., 2009) and impaired impulse control (Jonason & Tost, 2010) in Machiavellian individuals. Vulnerable reality testing and pathological object relations are reflected by Machiavellians’ inability to recognize others as individuals who are independent from the wishes and aims of the Machiavellian person (Christie & Geis, 1970; Wastell & Booth, 2003). With regard to primitive defenses, Machiavellians’ view of others as malevolent (Christie & Geis, 1970) might be a result of

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projecting their own ill intentions onto others. Machiavellians are also described as experts in inducing guilt in others, whilst they hardly experience this emotion themselves (Vangelisti, Daly, & Rudnick, 1991). This can be a typical case of projective identification, an effort to control one's own unbearable emotional states in others.

Moreover, Life History Theory (LHT) (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991) offers a common frame of understanding for both Machiavellian and borderline personality traits. LHT is a mid-level evolutionary theory concerned with resource allocation (investment in somatic growth vs. reproductive activity). Available resources determine whether faster or slower life history strategies (LHSs) are more adaptive for the individual. According to Belsky et al. (1991) early developmental conditions – such as parental investment, family structure and functioning – are predictive cues for future resources, hence, decisions about adaptive LHSs are based on these cues as well. Individuals from adverse, potentially traumatizing childhood environments – like borderline patients (Brüne, 2014; Brüne, Ghiassi, & Ribbert, 2010) – are more likely to pursue a fast LHS with, for example, impaired control of impulses and preference for short-term romantic relationships (Belsky et al., 1991). Several studies also link both the characteristics (e.g., impaired impulse control and unrestricted socio-sexuality [Birkás, Csathó, Gács, & Bereczkei, 2015; Jonason & Tost, 2010; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012]) and the onto-genetic origins (e.g., neglectful parents and disengaged family of origin [Láng & Birkás, 2014; Láng & Lénárd, 2015]) of Machiavellianism to fast LHSs.

## 2. Aims of the study and hypothesis

Given the parallels between BPO and Machiavellianism, detailed above, and the presence of fast life history as a common underlying strategy, we hypothesized that BPO would be characteristic of individuals with a more pronounced Machiavellian attitude. Further, we wanted to ascertain which facets of BPO predict Machiavellian personality traits.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

After giving their informed consent, 225 participants (130 female) completed the inventories. Their average age was 32.33 years ( $SD = 5.42$ ). More than half of the participants (52 percent) graduated from a university, and everyone had at least eight years of formal education. Participants were recruited through the personal contacts of PhD students. In order to obtain results that are more generalizable, student status was an exclusion criterion for the study. Subjects were invited to participate in a study that was aimed at revealing the relationship between interpersonal relations, early family environment, and certain personality traits. Inventories and demographic questions were completed in private, in paper–pencil format. Participants returned inventories to research assistants in person, in closed envelopes.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Mach-IV

Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20-item self-report scale with three subscales that measure Machiavellian attitudes. *Tactics subscale* measures the deceptive and exploitative attitude toward others (e.g., “It is wise to flatter important people”). *Views subscale* measures identification with a cynical attitude towards the world (e.g., “It is safest to assume that all people have a vicious streak

and it will come out when they are given a chance”). *Moral subscale* measures ignorance of morality (e.g., “People suffering from incurable diseases should have the choice of being put painlessly to death”). Participants rated statements of Mach-IV on a seven-point Likert scale according to their degree of agreement with the statements. Internal reliabilities for total score, Tactics, and Views subscales were acceptable ( $.56 < \text{Cronbach's } \alpha < .82$ ). The Moral subscale proved to be unreliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .29$ ), and as a consequence, this subscale was omitted from further analyses.

#### 3.2.2. Borderline Personality Inventory

Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI) (Leichsenring, 1999) is a 53-item self-report measure of BPO. Although we believe that characteristics of BPO can be captured in a non-clinical sample, we decided to change the original “yes–no” response format of the BPI to a four-point Likert scale (from “never” to “always”). The reason for this was that we expected borderline features to be present to a lesser extent in a non-clinical sample. Nevertheless, this change could have resulted in an inventory that measures everyday psychopathology on the lower extremes of its scales.

BPI measures four aspects of BPO. *Identity Diffusion subscale* measures the individual's experiences of confused identity, depersonalization, and derealization (e.g., “I feel like I'm falling apart”). *Fear of Fusion subscale* refers to the fear of close, intimate relationships (e.g., “If a relationship gets close, I feel trapped”). *Primitive Defense Mechanisms subscale* measures the extent of primitive defenses utilized against anxiety (e.g., “People appear to me to be hostile”). *Impaired Reality Testing* refers to the occurrence of perceptual abnormalities (e.g., “I feel that people or things change in their appearance, when they really do not”). BPI Cut-20 scale contains the 20 most discriminating items. Internal reliability proved to be satisfactory ( $.71 < \text{Cronbach's } \alpha < .91$ ) for all scales except for Impaired Reality Testing (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .23$ ). Therefore, the Impaired Reality Testing scale was omitted from further analysis.

### 3.3. Statistical analyses

For statistical analyses, we used SPSS 19.0 for Windows. In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlations and multiple linear regressions were used to reveal relationships between aspects of Machiavellianism and facets of BPO.

## 4. Results

According to the results of Pearson's correlations (Table 1), Machiavellianism was significantly and positively correlated with overall BPI scores, with the BPI Cut-20 scale, and with all subscales of BPI. The correlations were more pronounced for overall Machiavellianism and for Machiavellian interpersonal tactics.

Analyses of multiple linear regressions showed (Table 2) that after controlling for demographic variables and the commonalities between BPI subscales, fear of fusion and primitive defenses retained significant unique predictive power for overall Machiavellianism and deceitful interpersonal tactics. More frequent fear of fusion and use of primitive defenses predicted higher levels of Machiavellianism. No significant BPI subscale emerged as a predictor for the cynical view of human nature.

## 5. Discussion

Results supported our hypothesis and fit well with the conceptual framework offered by LHT (Belsky et al., 1991). Features of BPO make Machiavellian individuals successful manipulators and deceivers who enjoy considerable short-term benefits; benefits for which they have to pay in the long run. Diffuse identity – a cen-

**Table 1**Results of Pearson's correlations between Mach-IV and BPI scales. Descriptives ( $M \pm SD$ ) for the scales are presented in the first column.

	$M \pm SD$	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Mach-IV total score	92.96 $\pm$ 15.82							
2. Mach-IV tactics subscale	32.47 $\pm$ 9.74	.926**						
3. Mach-IV views subscale	32.73 $\pm$ 6.28	.818**	.588**					
4. BPI total score	18.64 $\pm$ 12.67	.480**	.461**	.276**				
5. BPI cut-20 score	7.86 $\pm$ 5.96	.444**	.428**	.238**	.940**			
6. BPI identity diffusion subscale	2.31 $\pm$ 2.53	.324**	.321**	.166*	.832**	.794**		
7. BPI fear of fusion subscale	3.13 $\pm$ 2.99	.402**	.390**	.219**	.804**	.869**	.615**	
8. BPI primitive defenses subscale	3.66 $\pm$ 3.19	.380**	.356**	.227**	.874**	.842**	.736**	.680**

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .**Table 2**

Results of multiple linear regressions for Mach-IV and BPI.

	Mach-IV total score			Mach-IV tactics subscale			Mach-IV views subscale		
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Age	-.032	-.501	.617	-.035	-.547	.585	-.026	-.375	.708
Gender (female)	-.156*	-2.504	.013	-.204**	-3.278	.001	-.065	-.972	.332
Level of education	-.054	-.850	.396	-.019	-.295	.768	-.154*	-2.253	.025
BPI identity diffusion	.017	.190	.849	.058	.633	.527	-.065	-.659	.511
BPI fear of fusion	.232**	2.711	.007	.216*	2.527	.012	.137	1.481	.140
BPI primitive defenses	.224*	2.253	.025	.195#	1.967	.050	.172	1.602	.111
R square	.213**			.217**			.086**		

#  $p < .01$ .\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .

tral problem in borderline patients (Kernberg, 1985) – might also be a central element of both success and dysfunctional personality in Machiavellian individuals. According to Erikson (1966), commitment is the psychosocial strength gained from successfully solving the identity crisis. Lack of commitment in Machiavellian individuals is represented in their unrestricted socio-sexuality (McDonald et al., 2012), their preference for short-term relationships (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), and their disregard for the strong norm of reciprocity in social dilemma games (that is, they are not committed to the community [Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012]). Lack of commitment and diffuse identity enable Machiavellians to rapidly change and adapt to the prevailing environment, that is, to act like “social chameleons”. Of course, a diffuse identity has negative consequences as well. Identity diffusion has repeatedly been found to be connected to less favorable outcomes in psychological well-being, substance abuse, and other forms of psychopathology (Vleioras & Bosma, 2005). The vulnerability that results from a diffuse identity (including fear of fusion) is defended against by the avoidance of intimacy and by an excessive reliance on primitive defenses such as projection or splitting-based devaluation of others and idealization of the self. Negative representations of others are also part of Machiavellian individuals' dismissing or fearful attachment (Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014).

Although fear of fusion leads to loneliness and lack of social support, it enables Machiavellian individuals to keep an emotional distance from others in stressful, highly arousing situations (McIlwain, 2003). This renders Machiavellian individuals the capacity to remain calm in risky situations that they might encounter whilst deceiving and manipulating others. In Machiavellians, emotional distance from others is accompanied by distance from their own emotions. This is in line with the alexithymia hypothesis of Machiavellianism (Wastell & Booth, 2003). According to this thesis, Machiavellian manipulative behavior is not a volatile strategy, but a result of impaired recognition of emotions in others and in the self. Since Machiavellian individuals cannot recognize the emo-

tional consequences of their exploitative behavior (e.g., guilt in themselves and sorrow or pain in others), they are not motivated to change their behavior in order to avoid adverse emotional states. Primitive defenses, such as splitting and projective identification, can also support this process.

The relatively small sample size and the relatively high level of education of our participants prevent the results from being broadly generalized. The socially constructed nature of the borderline syndrome (see, for example, Fuchs, 2007; Shaw & Proctor, 2005) might also question the cultural transferability of our results. Nevertheless, we believe that our study can contribute to refining our knowledge of both BPO and Machiavellianism. On the one hand, researchers of BPO can benefit from viewing borderline features as normal but exaggerated variations of interpersonal strategies rather than simply as symptoms of a clinical disorder (Brüne et al., 2010). On the other hand, our findings should encourage researchers of Machiavellianism to not only investigate further aspects of BPO, but also to transfer research designs from the rich field of clinical research of borderline states.

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