# Compete and Compromise: Machiavellianism and Conflict Resolution

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## Abstract

The aim of our present study was to examine Machiavellians' conflict management styles that have been neglected in previous research. One hundred eighty three participants completed the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument and the Mach-IV test. A positive correlation was found between the scores on the Mach scale and the scores on the Competing and Compromising subscales, while a negative correlation was found between Mach scores and Avoiding and Accommodating scores. These results coincide with findings on the Machiavellians' assertive, opportunistic and flexible strategies. Using the adequate problem solving strategies, Machiavellians can successfully adapt to the requirements of a given situation, and change tactics when necessary.

## Keywords:

Machiavellianism, conflict resolution, competing, compromising

## Introduction

Machiavellian persons are likely to exploit others as devices for their own purpose (Christie and Geis, 1970; Wilson, Near, and Miller., 1996). They are considered to be goal-oriented rather than person-oriented as they see people as manipulable in interpersonal situations (Hawley, 2006; Sutton and Keogh, 2000). Their behavioral attitudes are rationalistic and egoistic, as opposed to the more typically emotional and ethical orientation of non-Machiavellians (Ali, Amorim, and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Christie and Geis, 1970).

Early social psychological studies have revealed that in various experimental settings, high-Machs frequently outperform low-Machs, whether in bargaining and alliance forming or assuming leadership in group situations (Cherulnik, Way, Ames, and Hutto, 1981; Christie and Geis, 1970; Harrel and Hartnagel, 1976). More recent studies that used personality tests have found that Machiavellianism was negatively associated with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and positively with Neuroticism (Austin et al., 2007; Jakobwitz and Egan, 2006). Other studies that were based on experimental games indicated that Machiavellians gained higher profits at the end of the game and successfully avoided punishment (Czibor and Bereczkei, 2012; Spitzer, Fischbacher, Herrnberger, Gron, and Fehr, 2007). They often violated norms and used the tool of misleading cooperation (Bereczkei, Birkas, and Kerekes, 2010; Gunhorsdottir, McCabe, and Smith, 2002).

Former studies related to Machiavellianism have basically pursued three research streams. The first group of studies have examined the Machiavellians' personality traits, attitudes and moral sense. (eg. Ali et al., 2009, Jones and Paulhus, 2009, Paulhus and Williams, 2002) The second group of studies have also used experimental games to investigate the Machiavellians' skills in competing with others for financial and social resources (eg. Gunnthorsdottir et al, 2002, Spitzer et. al, 2007, Wilson et al, 1996). In the third group of studies, Machiavellianism was studied in workplace settings:

Machiavellianism was measured in connection with career choice and workplace behavior (eg. Fehr et al. 1992, Wakefield 2008), with the amount of salary (Aziz, 2004), with job satisfaction (eg. Hunt and Chonko 1984) and with leadership style (Deluga, 2001).

However, relatively few studies have examined the social and personality characteristics that *directly* influence success in the interpersonal relationships. These characteristics enable Machiavellians to efficiently mislead and exploit others, and make their thinking and behavior competitive, assertive and goal-oriented.

Therefore, the aim of our present study was to examine Machiavellians' conflict management styles. Are they willing to compromise with their partners in the hope of gaining the largest benefit, or do they behave in a power-oriented way such that the only thing they want is to win? How do they adapt themselves to the circumstances, i.e. can they collaborate with other people to fulfill their own concerns or do they handle others in a selfish and malevolent manner? Do they use the tactic of avoidance, i.e. withdrawing from the conflict, or do they permanently pursue their own interest?

To answer these questions, we used the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), which assesses an individual's behavior in conflict situations (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974). We attempted to assess the Machiavellians' methods of dealing with social interaction and to gain more insight into their basic motivations and attitudes.

## Method

*Participants.* In this cross-sectional study, 183 individuals (93 women), who were recruited in the city of Pécs, gave their informed consent to participate. The mean age of the participants was 21.02±1.61 years. Participants completed self-report questionnaires and received no reward for their participation.

*Measures.* To measure Machiavellianism, we used the Mach-IV (Christie and Geis, 1970), a 20-item self-report questionnaire. The Mach-IV measures the skills and ability to manipulate others. The subjects of the experiment are

asked to place different statements – taken, among others, from Machiavelli's The Prince – on a scale of seven depending on the degree to which they agree or disagree with it. Such statements include the following: 'The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear' or 'it is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there'.

The items of Mach-IV questionnaire can be divided into three subgroups. Some items measure interpersonal tactics, some deal with cynical view of the human nature and others are connected to abstract morality. The three subgroups do not produce statistically consistent factors (Dahling et al, 2010; Vleeming, 1984), therefore Machiavellianism is usually treated as a unidimensional scale. Following the tradition in psychological Machiavelianism research, only the total Mach score was used in this study (Cronbach's α= 0.76).

We measured conflict resolution with the TKI (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974), which consists of 30 pairs of statements. Participants had to indicate which of the two statements characterized them more. The Thomas–Kilmann Mode Instrument was created by deriving two dimensions from Blake and Mouton's typology (1964): an assertiveness dimension and a cooperativeness dimension, forming a two by two matrix. According to the Thomas–Kilmann model, conflict resolution behavior can be simultaneously classified according to whether the behavior is cooperative or uncooperative, and whether it is assertive or unassertive. Based on the dichotomous combinations of these categories behavior can be grouped and labeled according to four categories, which are 'competing', 'collaborating', 'avoiding' and 'accommodating'. E.g., conflict resolution behavior that is uncooperative and assertive is labeled as 'competing' behavior. Behavior that is cooperative and assertive is labeled as 'collaborative'. The fifth category – compromising – constitutes a mid-point on both dimensions; i.e., a bit of cooperativeness and a bit of assertiveness. Statements – among others – include the following : 'I attempt to deal with all of his/her and my concerns (collaborating), 'I propose a middle ground' (compromising), and 'I try to win my position' (competing). The Thomas–Kilmann instrument uses a forced-choice format in which participants are forced to choose between two statements describing conflict related behaviors. For the instrument, participants are instructed to select the behavior in the pair that is most like their own. Each choice in the pair represents a form of conflict behavior that is scored as belonging to one of the five categories. In addition to points referring to all categories, we computed assertiveness and cooperativeness scores for each individual based on the following equations (Chanin and Schneer, 1984): assertiveness = (competing + collaborating) – (avoiding + accommodating); cooperativeness = (accommodating + collaborating) – (competing + avoiding).

*Statistical Analyses.* For statistical analyses, we used SPSS 19.0 for Windows. Aside from descriptive statistics, independent samples *t*-tests were used to test sex differences, while Pearson's correlations were used to test relationships between Machiavellianism and conflict resolution modes.

## Results

The descriptive statistics for the measures and correlations of the TKI dimensions are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed significant sex differences only in the case of Machiavellianism (t(181) = -3.97; p < 0.001). As expected, men (100.83±13.22) scored higher on the Mach-IV than women (93.00±13.50). Pearson's correlations (Table 3) showed that individuals with more Machiavellian traits em-

ployed more assertive and less cooperative conflict resolution strategies. On examining the relationship between Machiavellian traits and conflict resolution modes, we found that participants with more Machiavellian traits preferred more competing and more compromising modes of conflict resolution. Also, fewer avoiding and fewer accommodating modes of conflict resolution were preferred by individuals who scored higher on the Mach-IV.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the Mach-IV and TKI.

|  | Min | Max | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mach-IV | 52 | 129 | 86.85 | 13.89 |
| Assertiveness | -15 | 16 | 1.55 | 6.79 |
| Cooperativeness | -13 | 13 | 0.25 | 5.68 |
| Competing | 0 | 12 | 5.91 | 3.14 |
| Collaborating | 2 | 12 | 6.55 | 2.09 |
| Compromising | 1 | 12 | 6.64 | 1.88 |
| Avoiding | 0 | 11 | 5.64 | 2.30 |
| Accommodating | 0 | 11 | 5.26 | 2.59 |

Table 2. Pearson correlations between TKI factors.
* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.Results

|  | Competing | Collaborating | Compromising | Avoiding | Accommodating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Competing | - | - | - | - | - |
| Collaborating | -0.23** | - | - | - | - |
| Compromising | ns | ns | - | - | - |
| Avoiding | -0.43** | -0.40** | -0.26** | - | - |
| Accommodating | -0.57** | -0.19** | -0.39** | ns | - |

Table 3. Pearson correlations between Machiavellianism and conflict resolution.

|  | ASS | COOP | COMP | COLL | COMPR | AV | ACC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mach-IV | 0.25** | -0.21** | 0.27** | 0.09 | 0.18* | -0.19** | -0.22** |

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; ASS, Assertiveness; COOP, Cooperativeness; COMP, Competing; COLL, Collaborating; COMPR, Compromising; AV, Avoiding; ACC, Accommodating.

## Discussion

According to our results, assertiveness correlated positively, while cooperativeness correlated negatively with Mach scores. This means that high-Mach individuals pursued their own goals and did not consider other people's benefit or success. These results are in line with former research that found high-Machs to be egoistic and goal-oriented (Ali et al., 2009; Christie and Geis 1970). Further analyses of the relationships between Machiavellianism and specific modes of conflict resolution gave a more detailed picture about Machiavellian individuals' attitudes in conflict situations.

A positive correlation was found between the scores on the Mach scale and the scores on the Competition subscale. This was not surprising due to the Machiavellians' competitive character: they are described as assertive, dominant and malevolent (Christie and Geis, 1970; Jones and Paulhus, 2009). The Machiavellian strategy is a typical competitive conflict resolution mode, because it implies a tendency to pursue one's own goal at the expense of others. The Machiavellian person behaves in a self-interested and power-oriented way; they can use different ways of manipulating and misleading others that seem appropriate to win in various circumstances.

Indeed, former research has confirmed that Machiavellians pursue an opportunistic strategy, and that they frequently conceal their intentions in order to achieve their goals (Wilson et al., 1996). In a recent study, subjects were asked to volunteer and offer their help in a less or more costly way within public and anonymous conditions (Bereczkei et al., 2010). Subjects with high scores on the Mach-IV were not likely to give assistance when they were not observed by others. However, they increased their help to others when their group mates could observe their behavior. In other words, high-Mach persons disguised their selfishness and pretended to be altruistic in the presence of others, but realized their self-interest in public conditions. They considered altruism as a tool for competition that increases their recognition and reputation in their group that, in turn, may provide additional advantages for them. Other studies also revealed the Machiavellians' opportunistic character: they frequently exploited interpersonal strategies, bent the rules and improvised. They thrived in situations when they had more decision power, fewer rules and low structural organization (Cherulnik et al., 1981; Jones and Paulhus, 2009).

In accordance with the previous finding, our study found a negative association between accommodating conflict resolution and Machiavellianism. The Thomas-Kilmann model (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974) states that accommodation is the opposite of competition, and implies unassertive and cooperative behavior. An individual with this kind of problem solving approach would neglect his or her own concerns to satisfy the needs and desires of the others. Machiavellians are obviously not such persons, in that they are not willing to meet the needs of others even in the long run. Machiavellianism is characterized by relative independence from the opinion of others and a strictly rational and utilitarian approach to social dilemmas (Fehr, Samsom, and Paulhus, 1992; McIllwain, 2003; Wilson et al., 1996). In another study, subjects were asked to write a story in the first person on being shipwrecked on a deserted island in the company of two others (Wilson, Near, and Miller, 1998). Judged by their fictional creations, high Machs were rejected as social partners for most relationships.

On the other hand, Machiavellians characteristically attribute negative intentions to others (Christie and Geis, 1970; Hawley, 2006; Jakobwitz and Egan, 2006) and do not expect cooperation from them; they start out from the assumption that others would exploit them, if they themselves fail to do so (Repacholi, Slaughter, Pritchard, and Gibbs, 2003). Therefore, they are likely to perceive any social exchange as a socially threatening situation, independent of the degree of the actual risk. A study that used the Trust game found that subjects with higher scores on the Mach-IV scale who were the first player (investor) transferred a smaller amount of money to their partner compared to low-Machs, because they did not expect their partner to return in the second round (Bereczkei et al., 2013).

We also found a negative relationship between scores on the Avoiding subscale of TKI and Mach scores. The Avoiding conflict solving mode in the TK model is an unassertive but uncooperative behavioral attitude. When avoiding, individuals do not immediately pursue their concerns or those of the others. Rather, they postpone the manifestation of their interest until a more appropriate time, and withdraw from the conflict. Machiavellians are not individuals who avoid. They seek instantaneous profit and their behavior is mostly governed by directly attainable reward, whereas they frequently pay little attention to potential long-term costs (Christie and Geis, 1970; Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, and Smith, 2002). Several studies that used experimental games found that high-Mach people

start with a relatively low amount of contribution and do not exceed the others' contributions throughout the game (Bereczkei et al., 2013; Gunnsthorsdottir et al., 2002, Spitzer et al., 2007). They did not attempt to postpone their self-rewarding decision, in spite of the future possibility that the development of cooperation between the players over the rounds would provide a higher profit.

Our most interesting finding was a positive relationship between a compromising conflict solving mode and Machiavellianism. At first glance, this result seems controversial; if Machiavellians are selfish and narcissistic persons who are less likely to be concerned about other people beyond their own self-interest, why would they adjust their decisions to the others' behavior, and why would they engage in exchanging concessions? However, the Machiavellian strategy is frequently more complex and sophisticated than simply using a "first strike." Early social psychological studies have found that Machiavellians frequently change their strategies – e.g. they easily leave an alliance when leaving is advantageous for them, and they are likely to steal from someone who trusts them (Christie and Geis, 1970; Harrel and Hartnagel, 1976; Wilson et al., 1998).

Recent evidence suggests that one of the crucial Machiavellian characteristics underlying successful adaptation to the social environment is flexibility. A study that used a modified Ultimatum game found a positive correlation between overall earnings and Machiavellian score. This finding appeared to result from the Machiavellians' flexible adaptation to the social context; they earned most in the non-punishing condition of the game, whereas they escaped punishment in the punishment condition (Spitzer et al., 2007). Another recent study found that high-Machs in the Public Goods game track the previous movements of others and adjust their contributions to the behavior of their group mates (Czibor and Bereczkei, 2012). They were more sensitive to the signals of social context and considered the behavior of their partners to a greater extent when making a decision than non-Machiavellians. The permanent monitoring of others enabled them to properly adapt to the challenges of environmental circumstances. Machiavellian persons may be more flexible in their behavior, and exhibit a context-dependent behavior more so than non-Machiavellians.

Machiavellianism is often treated as a leadership style as well. In organizational psychology literature we can find controversial findings about the relation of Machiavellianism and leadership. High-Mach persons often emerge as leaders in small groups, but it is highly debated whether their leadership style contributes to good and effective leadership. Machiavellian leaders have some valuable traits and skills: they are often charismatic (House and Howell, 1992), can successfully promote their personal interest (Christie and Geis, 1970) and are especially effective in influencing others (Gardner and Avolio, 1998). However some of the characteristics connected to Machiavellianism influence leadership performance disadvantageously: high-Mach leaders are not supportive with their employees, do not consider their wishes or emotions (Deluga, 2001), and are not able to reduce tension in stressful work-situations (Drory and Gluskinos, 1980). High-Mach leaders are usually task oriented, while low-Mach individuals tend to be person-oriented leaders (Christie and Geis, 1970).

Our findings make a contribution to this issue. The conflict solving characteristics of high-Mach individuals can be one reason behind their specific leadership performance. A recent study (Schaubhut, 2007) suggested that managers, executives and top executives have high scores on TKI collaborating and competing factors and relatively low scores on compromising

and avoidance scales. The present study showed that high-Mach subjects had very similar conflict solving pattern, except for the high level of collaborating style. With the training of cooperation- and collaboration-skills organizations could more effectively take advantage of high-Mach leaders' strengths and special aptitude.

In summary, Machiavellians who permanently search for material and social benefits show excellent skills in conflict situations where the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. They are characterized by a higher competing and compromising, and a lower accommodating and avoiding conflict solving mode than low-Machs. They have very efficient reward-related decision making and a good ability for detecting and evaluating threats to their self-interest. Using the adequate problem solving strategies, Machiavellians can successfully adapt to the requirements of a given situation, and change tactics when necessary.

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