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Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and Interpersonal Difficulties in University Students

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Abstract

Interpersonal relationships are a very important part of the university life of a person. To explore the relationship between interpersonal difficulties and personality traits, a sample of 300 students in the age range of 18-28 years ($M=22.04$) was taken from different government and private universities. To measure the Machiavellian Personality Tendencies among students an indigenous tool was developed rooted in the Pakistani culture. Interpersonal Difficulties Scale (Saleem, Ihsan, & Mahmood, 2014) was used. It was revealed that students with high Machiavellian Personality Tendencies have more interpersonal difficulties and Machiavellian Personality Tendencies, gender, family system and birth order are significant predictors of interpersonal difficulties in university students. These results are discussed in the Pakistani cultural context and their implications are stated for future research and therapeutic work.

Keywords: interpersonal difficulties, Machiavellian personality, university students

Introduction

Everyone goes through the various stages of life from birth till death marked with different characteristics. In each stage, every individual is expected to think, feel and act in a particular way. Childhood is related to immediate gratification, when a baby wants to have all his/her wishes fulfilled with no responsibility in mind. On the other hand, adolescence is the stage when an individual wants to conform to peer group and is trying to find/forged an identity (Lourenço, 2016). However, the beliefs, experiences and attitudes developed in childhood stay with the individual during adolescence and are carried forward into adulthood which can be defined as a period of forming and maintaining relationships in multiple spheres of life, such as university, job, and marriage. Therefore, when an

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individual enters into adulthood, he faces various shifts in roles and responsibilities (Grey, Berzenski, & Yates, [2015](#)). Among the many challenges faced by an adult, forming interpersonal relationships is the most significant. During adulthood, personality takes shape and it contributes significantly to the person's thoughts, behaviors and emotions and may even affect the relationships that are interpersonal. In university life, it becomes necessary that one can conform to the norms of the group. It would aid in academic progress and it has been empirically proven that certain personalities are more adept in making and maintaining close friendships and intimate interpersonal relationships (Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, Meayer, Belenger, & Holenm, [2017](#)).

Some of the personality factors develop due to the influence of the environment while others are genetic. The underlying factors could be many and Machiavellian Personality Traits could be one of them, which consist of interpersonal manipulation and their motivation reflects coldness and selfishness. The goals of the personalities exhibiting these traits are more intrinsic in nature (such as sex, achievement and socialization) and they pursue them in tricky ways. Some individuals are high in Machiavellianism and others are low in it. Individuals who are high Machs give more importance to power, money and competition and they like to win at any cost. On the other hand, they give less significance to public structure, self-love and family apprehensions. Along with the skill of interpersonal manipulation, they have superior intelligence regarding people in social situations and they are able to anticipate the reactions of people in varied interpersonal situations (Brewer, & Abell, [2017](#)). Machiavellianism is also associated with Alexithymia which reflects that their inner systems of high Machs are poor in regulating emotions and they live in a world where they have little or no connection with their own emotions. This is why they are unable to relate their emotions to others (Brewer, Abell, & Lyons, [2014](#)).

A person with positive personality characteristics or factors can be more positive towards socialization and establishing relationships as compared to a person with a negative attitude or Machiavellianism which can be viewed as the source of interpersonal problems. Hence, when a person repeatedly faces difficulties in relating to others then such

difficulties are known as interpersonal difficulties (Inancsi, Lang, & Bereczkei, [2015](#)). There are several approaches that can define the causes, nature and types of interpersonal problems. However, broadly, they are dependent on the age and stage of an individual with the psychosocial and cultural context to be kept in mind (Saleem et al., [2014](#)).

Lang studied the correlation between interpersonal difficulties and Machiavellianism that can lead towards disorders. Findings revealed aggression and ambivalence in relationship as significant predictors of Machiavellianism. Another study conducted by Inancsi, Lang and Bereczkei revealed that avoidant attachment style is apparent in broad social associations of Machiavellians. Moreover, evading is exaggerated by attachment anxiety when it comes to intimate relationships. This study also reported that Machiavellians exploit their partners and have negative representation of significant others in their minds (Inancsi, Lang, & Bereczkei, [2015](#)).

Although Machiavellianism has been studied with interpersonal relationship and other construct of psychology, however, it is unfortunate that Machiavellianism has not been studied and given due importance in collective cultures like the Pakistani culture, where social interactions are crucial with reference to psychosocial adjustment. With the passage of time, romantic relationships become necessary for psychological and social adjustment. When an individual faces interpersonal difficulties, it manifests its consequences in the form of academic grades, poor social desirability and lack of attention towards future goals. Nobody can deny individual differences in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and such differences reflect that personality plays a crucial role in them. Ultimately, this study is aimed to enlighten the positive/negative role of Machiavellian Personality Tendencies in interpersonal difficulties as an underlying factor for poor adjustment in university environment. With the culturally relevant empirical evidence, as psychologists we would be able to intervene in an optimum way making the Machiavellian personalities understand their inner working models using psycho-education which can be fruitful for their interpersonal relationships, chiefly romantic relationships in later life.

2. Objectives

The aim and objective of the study can well be elaborated with the following points.

- To explore the relationship between Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and interpersonal difficulties.
- To explore the impact of demographic variables on the relationship between Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and interpersonal difficulties

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

Cross-sectional research design was used for collecting data from university students of government and private sector universities of Lahore and Multan.

3.2 Participants

The sample included 300 university students, among those 151 were graduate and 149 were postgraduate students. Furthermore, data was collected from 158 male students and 142 female students.

3.3 Measures

3.3.1. Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher with the help of literature based on the socio-demographic information of the participants including their age, gender, birth order, family, monthly income, education, family system (join/ nuclear) and the number of siblings.

3.3.2. Machiavellian personality tendencies scale. It is an indigenous scale used in the current study with acceptable psychometric properties; Cronbach's alpha was 0.70 which indicated that the scale is reliable. There were two factors known as 'Interpersonal Manipulation' and 'Duplicity'. The test retest reliability of the scale was 0.90 and split half reliability was 0.78.

3.3.3. Interpersonal difficulties scale. This measure was used to assess interpersonal difficulties in university students. This scale consists

of six factors labelled as ‘dominated by others’, ‘low self-confidence’, ‘mistrust’, ‘lack of Assertiveness’, ‘lack of boundaries’ and ‘unstable relationships’. Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.83 which shows that it has sound psychometric properties (Saleem et al., [2014](#)).

3.4 Procedure

With due permission, sample was collected from private and public sector universities of Lahore and Multan. Prior to data collection, the respondents were debriefed about the purpose of the study and after ensuring them about their confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and concealment of their identity and responses, consent was taken. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire. It took around 10 minutes to fill the questionnaire. The questions and queries of the participants were answered by the researcher side by side and at the end.

4. Results

This chapter discusses the results of the current study conducted on university students. It includes the description of the demographics and the use of inferential statistics to explore the relationship between the main variables and demographic variables.

Table 1
Mean, Median and Standard Deviation of the Age and No. of Siblings of the Participants (N=300)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Median</i>
Age	22.04	1.83	_____
No of Siblings	e_____	_____	4

Note: *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard deviation

The results revealed that the mean age in years is 22. The average number of siblings is believed to be approximately 4 as it’s clear from the median of the number of siblings the participants have.

Table 2
Frequencies and Percentages of the Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N-300)

Variables	<i>F</i>	%
Gender		
Men	158	52.7
Women	142	47.3
Education		
Graduate	151	50.3
Post Graduate	149	49.7
Birth Order		
First Born	54	17.3
Second Born	104	34.7
Middle Born	117	39.0
Last Born	27	9.0
Family System		
Nuclear	170	56.7
Joint	130	43.3
Family Income		
Below Average	96	32.0
Average	165	55.0

Note. : *f* = Frequency, % = Percentage

4.1 Prevalence of Machiavellian Personality Tendencies

Table 3
Percentile Point and Raw Score on the Factors of Machiavellian Personality Tendencies

Percentile Point	F1	F2	MPTT
10	3	13	21
20	6	15	24
30	7	16	27
40	9	18	28
50	11	19	31
60	14	20	32
70	16	22	35
80	18	23	37
90	21	25	42



The above table indicates the percentile point on two factors and the total of MPT with an interval of 10 %.

Table 4

Inter-Correlation, Mean, and Standard Deviation of the Participants (N=300) on Two Factors of MPT and total MPT and Six Factors of IDS and Total IDS.

Factors	MPTF1	MPTF2	MPTT	IDSF1	IDSF2	IDSF3	IDSF4	IDSF5	IDS6	IDST
MPTF1	-	-.09(ns)	.80 ***	.28**	.34***	.36***	.02(ns)	-.04(ns)	.30**	.33***
MPTF2		-	.52 ***	.04(ns)	-.07(ns)	.11	.19*	.24**	.09(ns)	.16*
MPTT			-	.27**	.29**	.30**	.14*	.10(ns)	.31**	.38 ***
IDSF1				-	.52***	.49 ***	.24**	.22**	.45***	.76***
IDSF2					-	.52***	.27**	.23**	.44***	.77***
IDSF3						-	.11(ns)	.18*	.38***	.69***
IDSF4							-	.27**	.27**	.51***
IDSF5								-	.29**	.53***
IDSF6										.69***
IDST										
M	11.81	19.04	30.8	9.73	9.27	9.68	7.41	8.34	6.84	51.44
SD	6.75	4.73	7.88	3.79	3.76	3.59	2.96	3.11	2.82	13.47

MPTF1= Interpersonal manipulation, MPTF2= Duplicity, IDSF1= Dominated by others, IDSF2= low self-confidence, IDSF3= Mistrust, IDSF4= lack of assertiveness, IDSF5= lack of boundaries, IDSF6= Unstable relationship, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

4.1.1. Hypothesis I. It is hypothesized that Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and interpersonal difficulties have a positive relationship. The table 4 reveals that overall Machiavellian Personality Tendencies have a positive correlation with interpersonal difficulties, which means that students who have Machiavellian Personality Tendencies face interpersonal difficulties; the higher the tendencies the higher will be the ratio of interpersonal difficulties. Hence, the hypothesis is accepted. Students with interpersonal manipulation have a positive relationship with F1 (dominated by others), F2 (low self-confidence) and F6 (instability in relationships) factors of interpersonal difficulties and IDS. On the whole, the Machiavellian personality factor labelled 'interpersonal manipulation' has a positive correlation with interpersonal difficulties.

The results of the second Machiavellian personality factor 'duplicity' indicated that it is also positively correlated with interpersonal difficulties. It has a significant positive relationship with 'mistrust', 'lack of assertiveness' and 'lack of boundaries'. On the contrary, it has no relation with 'unstable relationships', 'low self-confidence' and passive behavior. The table also reveals that students with Machiavellian personality tendencies have more trust issues. They mistrust others as shown by the mean.

4.1.2. Hypothesis II. Machiavellian personality tendencies and demographic variables including gender, education, birth order, family system and income successfully predict interpersonal difficulties.

Table 5
Multiple Regression Analysis of Machiavellian and Demographic Variables to Predict Interpersonal Difficulties in University Students (N=300)

	B	SEB	B	p<
Step 1 ($R=.382, \Delta R^2=.146$)				
MPT Total	.652	7.18	.382	0.001***
Step 2 ($R=.457, \Delta R^2=.209$)				
Gender	-2.89	-2.04	-.107	0.04*
Birth Order	-2.25	-2.57	-.147	0.004**

Education	0.65	1.53	0.024	0.67
Family System	-1.034	1.42	-0.38	0.47
Family Income	3.27	2.89	.156	0.002*

Note: $p < 0.01^*$, $p < 0.05^{**}$ Step 1, $F = (50.812)$, Step 2 $F = (14.152)$. Step 3 $F = (9.350)$

To check the predictors of interpersonal difficulties in relation to Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and demographics, multiple regression analysis was done and the results revealed that in step 1 Machiavellian Personality Tendencies are a positive predictor of interpersonal difficulties. In step 2, gender is a predictor of interpersonal difficulties and birth order and family income are also positive predictors of interpersonal difficulties among university students.

4.1.3. Hypothesis III. Women have more Machiavellian Personality Tendencies than men.

Table 6

Means, Standard Deviations t and p-value of Gender Categories on Two Factors and Total Machiavellian Personality Tendencies

Factors	Gender	M	SD	T	p<	Cohen's d
Interpersonal Manipulation	Men	11.54	6.89	.70	0.47 (ns)	0.082
	Women	12.10	6.60			
Duplicity	Men	19.30	4.55	1.10	0.31 (ns)	0.11
	Women	18.75	4.92			
MPT Total	Men	30.85	8.0	.003	0.99 (ns)	0.0
	Women	30.85	7.78			

Note: $df = 298$, $p > 0.05$, ns = Not significant

The above results indicate that there is no significant difference among women and men with reference to the Machiavellian Personality Tendencies.

4.1.4. Hypothesis IV. Postgraduate students have more Machiavellian Personality Tendencies than graduate students.

Table 7

Means, Standard Deviations t and p-value of Education Categories on Two Factors and Total Machiavellian Personality Tendencies.

Factors	Education	M	SD	t	p<	Cohen's d
Interpersonal Manipulation	Graduate	9.27	6.32	7.05	0.001***	0.81
	Post Graduate	14.38	6.20			
Duplicity	Graduate	19.75	.70	2.65	0.008*	0.30
	Post Graduate	18.32	4.67			
MPT Total	Graduate	29.03	7.96	4.13	0.001***	0.47
	Post Graduate	32.69	7.37			

Note df=298, p<0.05, p<0.001****

The above results indicate that there is a significant difference in graduate and postgraduate students' regarding Machiavellian Personality Tendencies. The mean of the sample of postgraduate students reveal that they have more Machiavellian tendencies as compared to graduate students or we can say that Machiavellian tendencies increase with education.

4.1.5. Hypothesis V. Women have more interpersonal difficulties than men.

Table 8

Means, Standard Deviations t and p-value of Gender on Six factors and Total Score of Interpersonal Difficulties in University Students

Factors	Gender	M	SD	T	p<	Cohen's d
IDSF1	Men	10.24	3.88	2.49	0.01**	0.29
	Women	9.15	3.61			
IDSF2	Men	9.59	3.81	1.58	0.11(ns)	0.18
	Women	8.91	3.68			
IDSF3	Men	10.23	3.53	1.89	0.05*	0.22
	Women	9.44	3.63			
IDSF4	Men	7.76	2.75	2.16	0.03*	0.25

	Women	7.02	3.15			
IDSF5	Men	8.09	2.876	-1.47	0.14(ns)	0.17
	Women	8.62	3.34			
IDSF6	Men	7.06	2.81	1.42	0.15(ns)	0.16
	Women	6.59	2.82			
IDST	Men	52.97	12.97	2.08	0.38(ns)	0.24
	Women	49.74	13.85			

Note: $df=298$, $p<0.05^*$, $p<0.01^{**}$, *IDSF1= Dominated by others*, *IDSF2= Low Self Confidence*, *IDSF3= Mistrust*, *IDSF4= Lack of Assertiveness*, *IDSF5= Lack of Boundaries*, *IDSF6= Unstable relationships*, ns= Not significant

The above results indicate that there is no significant difference within both genders except for factor 3, 4 and 1. Slightly higher mean value of men reveals that they have more interpersonal difficulties as compared to women.

5. Discussion

The current study investigated the relationship between Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and interpersonal difficulties among university students. The results revealed that there is a significant relationship among Machiavellian Personality Tendencies and the six factors affecting interpersonal difficulties including ‘dominated by others’, ‘low self-confidence’, ‘mistrust’, ‘lack of assertiveness’, ‘lack of boundaries’, and ‘instability in relationships’ among university students. Machiavellian is a bad persona kind. Indeed, Machiavellians have a natural inclination to act deviously with others for their personal advantage and they hardly experience any remorse due to it (Rauthmann, [2012](#)).

Previous researches have also revealed that people who have Machiavellian personality experience problems in their relationships. Ali and Chamorro ([2010](#)) reported that Machiavellian tendency is negatively correlated with intimacy in relationships. Machiavellian personality will have a positive correlation with interpersonal difficulties.

Keeping in view the impact of environmental factors on personality is important because Western ideas and hypotheses are not essentially appropriate to all nations (Book et al., [2016](#)).

There is considerable evidence which effectively determines that personality traits vary from one culture to another and this is the predominantly factual stance when you compare an individual oriented culture with a collective culture. Literature showed that Machiavellianism is connected to more exposed, immoral and aggressive sexual attitudes as well as the diversity of selfish misleading tactics such as deceitfulness, divulging close secrets to third parties and even pursuing inebriation to secure sexual role (Lang, [2014](#)). Results related to the analysis revealed that Machiavellian personality is a strong predictor of interpersonal difficulties among university students.

Demographic variables were assessed with Machiavellian Personality Tendencies Scale to know about the relation between them. The results revealed that there is no significant difference in genders as shown by Machiavellian Personality Tendencies Scale. Literature revealed that there is a significant difference across genders in personality. A study by showed that males and females have significant differences in relationships but the analysis revealed that university students have no gender differences regarding this particular personality type. The reason behind no difference is that gender role is changing. Men no more consider themselves responsible for bread earning and women don't look themselves as slaves of men (Boterman & Bridge, [2015](#)).

Gender and education also have a close association while assessing the results of education with reference to Machiavellian Personality Tendencies. The results revealed that education and Machiavellian Personality Tendencies are positively correlated which means that people with high education have more Machiavellian tendencies as compared to people with low education. This is due to the fact that as our knowledge increases we come out with more ways to deal with others and we know more about masking our negative side. Literature reveals that education is an important part of human personality because it shapes human mind and it enriches human experience, so due to education personality tends to change a little or we can say that good education polishes human personality (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, [2015](#)). The current study reveals the same effect. This study was conducted on university students; it can also

be conducted on the general population and with reference to other personality traits like dark trade.

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