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Article

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Machiavellianism and task-orientated leadership: moderating effect of job autonomy

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Abstract

Despite the negative connotation of Machiavellianism, Machs are found in all kinds of organization and at almost all levels. How they function in organizations is worth examining. The present study explored the relationship between Machiavellianism and Task-Oriented Leadership. Job autonomy was also hypothesized as a moderator, impacting the relationship between the two variables. The sample for the study comprised of middle level managers working for different organizations in and around National Capital Region, Delhi, India. Machiavellian Personality scale (MPS), Task oriented Leadership style questionnaire, and Work autonomy scale were used to collect data. The data was analyzed with the help of SPSS V-21 and Process Hayes macros. Results revealed a significant positive relationship between Machiavellianism and Task-oriented leadership. Also, the relationship between the two constructs was moderated by high and average level of job autonomy.

Keywords Machiavellianism · Job autonomy · Task-oriented leadership · Leadership · Machiavellian leadership

1 Introduction

Machiavellianism, known for negative outcomes, is found in almost all organizations and at every level, such as, academics (Gürer and Çiftçi 2018), hospitals (Gkorezis et al. 2015), private sector (Rehman and Shahnawaz 2018), medical staff (Bratek et al. 2015), politicians (Silvester et al. 2013), police (Papazoglou et al. 2019), attorneys (Valentine and Fleischman 2003), athletes (Mirzaaghazadeh et al. 2016) and also in prospective employees/students (Rehman et al. 2018). Amoral orientation, cynical worldview and usage of manipulative tactics make the core of Machiavellianism (Christie and Gies 1970). They are also known for “Desire for status,” and “Desire for control” (Dahling et al. 2009). Machiavellians are suited for modern day businesses (Galie and Bopst 2006) as they prefer to be in leadership roles having status and desire for control over others and situations. They manipulate and use people to get the work done in the organization (Dahling et al. 2012). Given the nature of

Machiavellian people, the current research is an attempt to understand how they effectively manage to stay in organizations, work, and lead or manage people.

Machs (People high on Machiavellianism) usually indulge in unethical behavior, such as lying (Kashy and DePaulo 1996), emotional manipulation (Austin et al. 2007), dishonoring commitments (Forgas, 1998), revenge (Nathanson 2008), counterproductive work behavior (Rehman and Shahnawaz 2018), usage of hard and soft influential tactics such as threatening and ingratiation (Rehman et al. 2018), make use of information which could probably harm others financially (Sakalaki et al. 2007), high intentions of fraud (Utami et al. 2019), cheating (Cooper and Peterson 1980), emotional abuse (Brewer and Abell 2017) etc. However, there is also a positive side to Machs (Kumar 2019). They indulge in long term planning, if they see a need (Jones and Paulhus 2009). To reduce the probability of faulty decision-making, Machs truly introspect before making any decision and are sensitive to punishment (Spitzer et al. 2007). Jaffé et al. (2019) found that higher level of Machiavellianism is not significantly associated with cheating. Machiavellians were not found to be impulsive (Jones and Paulhus 2011) or indulge in gambling (Jones 2013). They tend to use persuasion, self-disclosure, and ingratiation, among other soft skills to get the work done by others (Fehr et al. 1992; Rehman et al. 2018). They are often termed as chameleons

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(Ruiz-Palomino and Bañón-Gomis 2017), which also highlights their capability to adapt according to the situations. They can shift from being cooperative to competitive or vice-versa, whenever required (Czibor and Bereczkei 2012). In a study conducted on former US presidents, people associated Mach leaders with greatness and charisma (Deluga 2001). Also, while developing a leadership scale for Polish managers, Babiak (2014) found Machiavellian style as a significant leadership style.

Despite the relevance of Machiavellianism for leadership, there is a dearth of research exploring the relationship between the two constructs (Belschak et al. 2018). Machs preferred leadership roles than low Machiavellians (Gies 1968). In an experimental study, Drory and Gluskinos (1980) found a positive association between Machiavellianism and leadership. They found a significant difference between high and low Machs as to how they interacted with the group members. They also found that high Machs gave more orders than low Machs. A positive association was found between Machiavellians and strategic and pioneer leadership (Amir and Malik 2017). Machiavellians are perceived as leaders with charisma (Deluga 2001; Gardner and Avolio 1998). Further, Bedell et al. (2006) found that Machiavellianism is associated with different leadership styles, depending on the level of Machiavellianism.

Despite the advent of many leadership styles, task-orientated leadership remains one of the crucial styles as task completion remains the *raison d'être* of the organization. A task-oriented leader focuses on task completion in order to meet the goals of the organization (Ruzgar 2018). It is about authority and decisions (Bass and Bass 2008). Task-oriented leadership was found to be positively associated with employee performance (Fayyaz et al. 2014). Tabernero et al. (2009) found that task-oriented leadership predicted group efficacy and positivity. Task-oriented leaders are usually known by different names, such as Mini Machiavellians, Authoritative, Exploitative, etc. (Sinha 1977), as they only care about task completion. Given the relevance of task completion as the principal goal of any organization, the current research focuses only on task-oriented leadership.

Machs focus on goal rather than on people or relationships (Christie and Gies 1970), implying that they would demonstrate task-oriented leadership approach, as they would want to get the work done, irrespective of the effects on subordinates such as emotional exhaustion (Gkorezis et al. 2015; Stradovnik and Stare 2018). They would like to take control of the situation, get the work done, and thrive on, if given status (Dahling et al. 2009). Machiavellian leaders can also be flexible and adapt as per the situation and yet would follow task orientation style to reach their goal (Dahling et al. 2012). Machiavellianism and task orientation were found to be significant predictors of team's effectiveness (Jones and White 1983). Thus, it seems that the task

orientation is the core of Machiavellian managers. However, to the best of our knowledge, this relationship has not been explored yet by the researchers. In the light of above, it was hypothesized that.

H1: Machiavellianism would be positively associated with task-oriented leadership.

Human behavior is context-specific (Tett and Burnett 2003). According to trait activation theory, personality does not manifest itself in vacuum; instead, it needs some contextual medium for doing so (Tett and Benett 2003). Thus, Machiavellians would also need favorable context to manifest itself in behaviors including task-oriented style/behavior. In the present research, it was hypothesized that job autonomy would be the contextual factor that would lead Machs to manifest task-oriented style. Job autonomy refers to the freedom to choose the way of doing one's work. Machiavellians benefit from the situation where rules aren't properly defined (Becker and O'Hair 2007; Gable et al. 1992; Shultz 1993). However, in those situations where rules were highly defined, Machs performed even worse than low Machiavellians (O'Connor and Morrison 2001; Shultz 1993; Sparks 1994). Few trait activators have been examined in explaining the relationship between Machs and outcome variables. For example, Greenbaum et al. (2017) found abusive supervision as a trait activator in the relationship between Machiavellianism and unethical behavior. Rehman and Shah Nawaz (2018) found that the relationship between Machs and counterproductive work behavior became insignificant in the presence of job autonomy. Zahur et al. (2020) found role ambiguity as a significant trait activator for Machs to indulge in self-presentable behavior. Thus, in the context of the present study, we proposed that job autonomy would moderate the relationship between machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership.

H2: The relationship between Machiavellianism and Task-oriented leadership would be moderated by Job autonomy.

2 Method

Following convenience sampling approximately 250 managers of multiple private organizations were approached, out of which 180 managers gave their written consent and participated in the current study. All the participants were briefed about the nature of the study. All the organizations were situated in and around Delhi, India. The data comprised of 52 females and 128 males. The mean age of the participants was found to be 31.3. The participants had an average experience of 4.2 years. Data from 12 managers were excluded in the initial data screening phase, as they all were managing a team of more than 50 subordinates each which makes them an outlier in terms of managing subordinates. Finally, the inferences were drawn from the data of 168 managers, out of which 122

were males, and 46 were female managers. The managers were managing 3–15 subordinates. The data was analyzed by SPSS v 21 and Process (Hayes 2013).

3 Measures

3.1 Machiavellianism

Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS) (Dahling et al. 2009) was used to assess Machiavellianism. The scale has 16 items and assesses four dimensions: Amoral, Distrust, Desire for Control, and Desire for status. Some of the sample items are “I would cheat if there was a low chance of getting caught,” “I like to give the orders in interpersonal situations,” “Status is a good sign of success in life.” Five-point Likert scale was used to record the responses, wherein 1 was assigned to “Strongly Disagree” and 5 meant “Strongly Agree.” The Cronbach’s alpha was found to be 0.82.

3.2 Job autonomy

9-item work autonomy scale from Breugh’s Instrument (1999) was used to assess job autonomy. Some of the sample items are “I am free to choose the methods to use in carrying out my work,” “I am able to choose the way to go about my job (the procedures to utilize),” “I have control over the scheduling of my work.” Five-point Likert scale was used to record the responses, wherein 1 was assigned to “Strongly Disagree” and 5 meant “Strongly Agree.” The Cronbach’s alpha was found to be 0.84.

3.3 Task-oriented leadership

10-items subscale of Leadership style questionnaire (Sinha 2009) was used to assess task-oriented leadership style. Some of the sample items are “I take special care that works gets top priority,” “I maintain high standard of performance,” “I see that my subordinates work to their capacity.” Five-point Likert scale was used to record the responses, wherein 1 was assigned to “Strongly Disagree” and 5 meant “Strongly Agree.” The Cronbach’s alpha was found to be 0.81.

4 Results

The data were screened for missing values and possible outliers. There were a total of 5 missing values, which were then replaced by the series mean. No possible outlier was found.

As all the data were collected through self-rated measures which makes it essential to check for common method variance (Podaskoff et al. 2003). There are many methods of doing so, but Harman Single Factor Technique is one of the most widely used method (Podsakoff et al. 2003; Podsakoff

and Organ, 1986). The underlying assumption of this technique is that if a substantial amount of common method variance is present, it will manifest in two ways: (1) a single factor will emerge from the factor analysis or (2) one factor will account for most of the covariance among the measures. In the present research, all the items were loaded on one factor in the exploratory factor analysis. The results showed that only 18% of the variance was explained by a single factor, which indicated that the data was free from common method bias.

The values of skewness were found to be in range from -1.356 to 0.889 , and values of kurtosis were found to be -1.192 to 2.247 , indicating the normality of the data (Kline 2005). Table 1 shows mean values of Machiavellianism, Job autonomy, and Task-oriented leadership style.

As shown in Table 1, the mean score of managers on Machiavellianism was found to be 49.3 with 8.9 standard deviations. The mean value indicates that managers scored just above the average value of the Mach scale, which would be 48. For job autonomy, the mean was found to be 33.1 with 5.6 standard deviations, indicating high job autonomy. As far as the task-oriented leadership is concerned, the mean was found to be 40.2 with 5.6 standard deviations, indicating high task-orientation. The correlation coefficients are shown in Table 2.

It can be seen from Table 2 that all the correlation coefficients among the constructs were found to be significant. The correlation coefficient ($r=0.15$, $p<.05$) shows a significant positive correlation between Machiavellianism and Job autonomy. The relationship between Machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership was found to be positive and significant ($r=0.22$, $p<.01$). The correlation coefficient ($r=0.45$, $p<.01$) also shows that there exists a significant positive relationship between Job autonomy and Task-oriented Leadership. The results of moderation analysis are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

From Table 3, it can be seen that overall model explains approximately 25% of the variance in task-oriented leadership. The interaction between Machiavellianism and Job autonomy explains 3% of the variance. From Table 4, it can be inferred that all the independent variables (Machiavellianism, Job autonomy, and Moderator (Mach * Job autonomy)) were a significant predictor of task-oriented leadership. Job Autonomy was found to be strongest predictor of task-oriented behavior ($b=0.44$, $p<.01$), followed

Table 1 Showing mean of the variables used in the study

Construct	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Machiavellianism	168	49.3	8.9
Job autonomy	168	33.1	5.6
Task-oriented leadership	168	40.2	5.6

Table 2 Showing correlation coefficients among the variables

Construct	Job autonomy	Task-oriented leadership
Machiavellianism	0.15*	0.22**
Job autonomy		0.45**

*Correlation coefficient is significant at .05 levels

**Correlation coefficient is significant at .01 levels

Table 3 Showing regression model

R	R Square	F	Sign	R Sq. change (Due to Int.)	Sign
0.502	0.252	20.07	0.001	0.03	0.04

Table 4 Showing regression coefficients

Construct	B	Std. Error	t	Sign
Machiavellianism	0.11	0.05	2.12	0.04
Job autonomy	0.44	0.07	5.99	0.01
Moderator (Mach*Job Aut)	0.02	0.01	2.09	0.04

Table 5 Showing conditional effect

Job Autonomy	Effect	SE	t	P
– 5.58	0.003	0.07	0.04	0.97
00	0.11	0.05	2.16	0.04
5.58	0.22	0.07	2.85	0.01

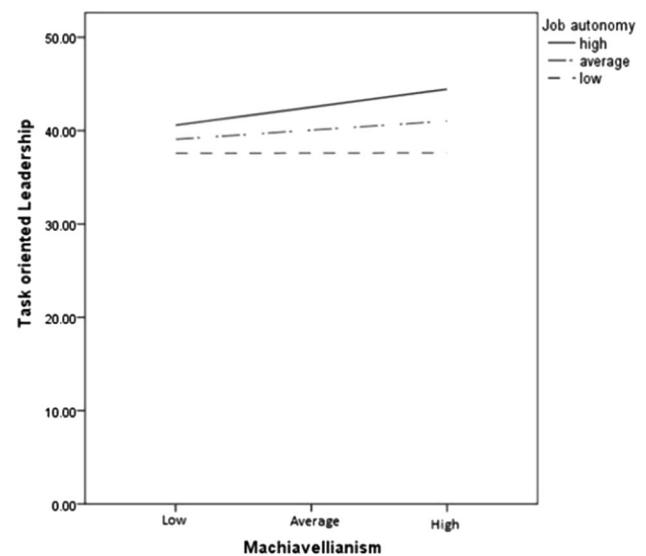
by Machiavellianism ($b=0.11$, $p < .05$). The moderator was found to be a significant predictor ($b=0.02$, $p < .05$). Further, the results of the conditional effects are shown in Table 5.

As shown in Table 5, it can be inferred that job autonomy significantly moderates the relationship when its high ($t=2.85$, $p < .01$), and when its average ($t=2.16$, $p < .05$). However, low job autonomy did not had a moderating effect ($t=0.04$, $p > .05$). The graphical representation of the condition effect is shown in Fig. 1.

5 Discussion

The present research aimed to study the relationship between Machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership. Job autonomy was also tested as a possible moderator in the light of trait activation theory and both the hypotheses were not rejected.

A significant positive relationship was found between Machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership. Other

**Fig. 1** Showing graphical representation of conditional effect

researchers, for example, Bedell et al. (2006), Deluga (2001), Gardner and Avolio (1998) found clear associations of Machiavellianism with charismatic leadership. However, charisma may be more suitable for the top-level manager of the organization. When it comes to middle and lower-level managers, their primary work is to manage and get the work done from the subordinates. A manager high on Machiavellianism would focus on task completion as they are not people-oriented (Dahling et al. 2012). As the sample of the present study comprised of lower and middle-level managers (the average experience being 4.2 years), their task was to manage and supervise the work of subordinates, hence task-oriented leadership seems more relevant than other forms of leadership. Therefore, it can safely concluded that Machs manifest task-oriented leadership especially at lower and middle level of organizations.

It was also found that job autonomy moderated the relation between Machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership. The results also revealed that the moderation happened only when job autonomy is either high or average. The results provide evidence that Machs would manifest task-oriented leadership directly as well as when relevant situational factors such as sufficient amount of job autonomy is given to get the assigned work done. The results are also in line with previous studies (for example, Greenbaum et al. 2017; Rehman and Shahnawaz 2018; Zahur et al. 2020).

The results clearly reveal that despite mostly negative connotations of Machiavellianism, Machs can be functional as they focus on task. There is also evidence that Machs indulge in different forms of impression management (Ickes et al. 1986; Jaiswal and Bhal 2014; Kowalski et al. 2018; Rosenberg and Egbert 2011). Completing the assigned tasks could be one form of impression management for them.

Machs are not impulsive (Jones and Paulhus 2011), rather they are long term planner and strategic thinker (Jones and Paulhus 2009). Therefore it can be inferred that by meeting the targets and getting the work done is part of their strategic planning to move ahead in the organization as they desire for power and status, which might help them in future.

6 Conclusion and limitations

The present research examined the relationship between Machiavellianism and task-oriented leadership directly as well as in interaction with job autonomy. The results showed that Machiavellians would manifest task-oriented leadership especially when job autonomy is high or average. This is in sync with the trait activation theory which posits that situational cues are essential for personality-behavior relationship to work. The results are interesting as Machs are found in almost all organizations and the real challenge is to understand how they work. The results of the present study provides further evidence that Machs are not pathological all the time and they can be functional under appropriate situations (e.g., job autonomy).

Despite the significant contribution, the study too has some limitations. The sampled managers had different numbers of subordinates under them. Some of them had only 3 subordinates, while few had 15. Males outnumbered females which made it difficult to generalize the findings. The data was collected from private organizations situated in and around national capital region of Delhi. All the scales were self-report measures, which further curbed the generalization of the findings of the present research.

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