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## Perceived childhood emotional parentification is associated with Machiavellianism in men but not in women

**Abstract:** Recent research has revealed several developmental aspects of Machiavellianism. In this study, we explored the potential relationship between perceived parentification in the family of origin and Machiavellianism in adulthood. Three hundred and ninety five Hungarian adults (282 women) completed self-report measures of parentification and Machiavellianism. Results showed that emotional parentification and children's unacknowledged efforts to contribute to the well-being of their families were associated with Machiavellianism – but only in men. Machiavellian tactics and worldview are proposed as possible coping mechanisms with the neglectful and unpredictable family environment. Gender differences in the results are explained in terms of gender role socialization and men's and women's different susceptibility for different forms of psychopathology.

**Key words:** Machiavellianism, parentification, expressive caregiving, unfairness, destructive entitlement, gender role socialization

### 1. Introduction

Machiavellianism – either as a component of the Dark Triad or separately – has been a widely studied construct since the 1970s. Recent research (Láng & Birkás, 2014; Láng & Lénárd, 2015; Ryumshina, 2013) evidenced that experiences in the family of origin had a considerable effect on adolescents' and adults' Machiavellianism. Further, narcissistic personality traits have already been reported to be a possible outcome of destructive forms of parentification (Jones & Wells, 1996). Given the relationship between narcissism and Machiavellianism – as components of the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – and the link between parentification and narcissism (Jones & Wells, 1996), the aim of this study was to explore a possible relationship between parentification in the family of origin and Machiavellianism in adulthood.

#### 1.1. Parentification

Parentification is a violation of inner family boundaries where children are enlisted to take emotional, practical and sometimes even financial responsibility for family members (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Based on their different nature and outcomes, scholars who

investigate the topic usually differentiate between three aspects of parentification (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001): (i) instrumental caregiving refers to practical responsibilities of the child (e.g., household chores, shopping) ; (ii) expressive caregiving refers to the child's responsibility for the emotional well-being of parents and other family members ; and (iii) perceived unfairness refers to the child's subjective evaluation of the acknowledgement and reciprocation of her efforts (or lack of thereof).

With preventing the satisfaction of the child's developmentally appropriate needs, parentification can be considered as a specific form of neglect (Hooper, 2007). Thus, clinical literature emphasizes the detrimental effects of parentification leading to different forms of mental health symptoms. In their meta-analytic study, Hooper, DeCoster, White, and Voltz (2011) found associations between parentification and psychopathology with small effect size. Role-reversal – a specific form of parentification where the child cares for her parents (Barnett & Parker, 1998) – is also conceived of as a form of attachment disorder (Zeanah, Mammen, & Lieberman, 1993). Main and Cassidy (1988) also described a manifestation of disorganized attachment that was labeled controlling. In these parent-child dyads children are extremely solicitous and overly bossy and

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rejecting towards the caregiver. Several variables have been proposed to mediate this effect including problems with differentiation from the family (Jankowski, Hooper, Sandage, & Hannah, 2011) and a permanent schema of unpredictability (Burnett, Jones, Bliwise, & Ross, 2006).

However, already Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) suggested that moderate forms of parentification – as a normative response to family crises – can have beneficial long-term consequences, such as promotion of self-esteem, capacity of empathy, and a sense of altruism (Jurkovic, 1997). McMahon and Luthar (2007) found that a curvilinear relationship existed between the level of parentification and several measures of childhood adjustment. No parentification at all and extreme levels of it predicted the worst outcomes, whereas a moderate level of parentification was associated with the highest level of adjustment.

### 1.2. Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is a dispositional attitude characterized by manipulative and deceitful interpersonal tactics, a cynical world-view, and a utilitarian ignorance of moral norms (Christie & Geis, 1970). Behavioral genetic studies showed that environmental factors (Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011) and especially shared environmental factors (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008) accounted for a significant part of between-subject variance in Machiavellianism. Despite these findings, few studies have focused on childhood experiences that could be potentially formative for the development of Machiavellian personality traits. In an early research, Kraut and Price (1976) found that manipulative children have parents who also show high levels of Machiavellianism. Besides replicating the above mentioned results, a recent study on the relationship between Machiavellianism of grown-up children and their parents showed that the strength of this association weakened as children grew older (Siwy-Hudowska & Pilch, 2014). We consider the latter findings to support an argument for environmental effects in the transgenerational transmission of Machiavellianism.

Parenting and family functioning have also been found to be linked to Machiavellianism in adolescents and adults. Several studies showed that Machiavellianism was significantly associated with recollections or concurrent perceptions of parental rejection (Kraut & Price, 1976; Láng & Birkás, 2015; Ojha, 2007). Moreover, Láng and Lénárd (2015) showed that higher levels of Machiavellianism in adults were associated with more frequent memories of childhood negative home atmosphere and neglect. Studies from a family systems perspective further contribute to the issue. Ryumshina (2013) and Láng and Birkás (2014) found that adolescents' perceptions and teachers' reports of family disengagement was positively correlated with Machiavellianism. Láng and Birkás (2014) also found that chaotic family functioning was more characteristic of Machiavellian adolescents' families. This chaotic family functioning (Olson, 2000) might include lack of discipline, unstable family rules, and even role-reversal – a specific form of parentification (Barnett & Parker, 1998).

## 2. Aims of the study, hypothesis

As presented in detail earlier, parentification not only includes a caregiving burden but also the neglect of children's developmental needs (Hooper, 2007), and a pervasive feeling of uncertainty in children (Burnett et al., 2006). Both neglect (Láng & Lénárd, 2015) and unpredictable family environment (Láng & Birkás, 2014) demonstrated associations with Machiavellianism. Moreover, in destructive parentification (Jurkovic, 1998) caregiving ceases to be a genuine expression of concern for others. Rather it becomes a means of regaining control in an unpredictable environment, a means of persuading significant others (Barnett & Parker, 1988) and a means of maintaining proximity to inaccessible attachment figures (Main & Cassidy, 1998). Not only emotional parentification per se, but rather inappropriate acknowledgement of filial responsibility, unsupported or unreciprocated caregiving (Jankowski et al., 2011) create an "account due" or destructive entitlement (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986) where the individual feels entitled to abuse others as a legitimate compensation for childhood adversities. Machiavellian exploitative behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970) can be one form of this abusive attitude towards others. Based on the above line of reasoning, we hypothesized that self-reports of more intense childhood parentification (i.e., destructive parentification; Jurkovic, 1998) – especially emotional parentification and unfairness – would lead to higher levels of Machiavellianism in adults. Given that considerable gender differences has been reported in the literature of both Machiavellianism (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010) and parentification (Hooper et al., 2011), we tested this hypothesis separately for men and women.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Sample and procedure

In our cross-sectional study, 395 Hungarian adults (282 women) gave their informed consent and completed self-report questionnaires. Their average age was 30.02 years ( $SD=10.50$  years). Participants were recruited via social network (Facebook), and scales were administered online using SurveyMonkey. Participation was voluntary and participants received no reward in any form.

### 3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellianism was measured by the Mach-IV test (Christie & Geis, 1970). This is a 20-item self-report instrument. Agreement with statements that describe Machiavellian attitudes and personality traits (e.g., "Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so") are evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale. Due to low reliability indices of the subscales, only total score was used in further statistical analyses. Mach-IV was reliable as a unidimensional measure (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.73$ ).

3.2.2. Filial Responsibility Scale-Adult (FRS-A; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). FRS-A is a 60-item

self-report measure of three different aspects of perceived parentification from two temporal perspectives: retrospective and current. In this study, only 30 items from a retrospective perspective were used to measure three dimensions of parentification in participants' family of origin: (i) Instrumental Caregiving (e.g., "I worked to help make money for my family"); (ii) Expressive Caregiving (e.g., "I often felt like a referee in my family"); and (iii) Unfairness (e.g., "In my family, I often gave more than I received"). Internal reliabilities for each of the three scales were acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranged from .76 to .92).

### 3.3. Statistical analyses

To analyze the data, we used IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows 19.0. Beside descriptive statistics we used one-way ANOVA to test gender differences on the measured variables. To test the connection between the three aspects of parentification and Machiavellianism, we used Pearson's correlations and multiple linear regressions. These analyses were run separately for men and women.

## 4. Results

We used ANOVAs to test the gender differences on the measured variables. Results (Table 1) of these analyses revealed significant gender differences on all variables. Machiavellianism was more characteristic of men, whereas all aspects of parentification were more characteristic of women. These results are in line with previous findings on

gender differences in both Machiavellianism (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010) and parentification (Hooper et al., 2011).

Pearson's correlation between Machiavellianism and the three aspects of parentification yielded the following results (Table 2). For men, there were weak but significant positive correlations between Machiavellianism, expressive parentification and perceived parental unfairness. For women, there was no significant correlation between Machiavellianism and any measured aspect of parentification.

Next, the predictive power of parentification variables on Machiavellianism was tested with multiple linear regressions (Table 3). For women, no significant predictor emerged, and the model had no significant predictive power. For men, the model accounted for 8% of variance in Machiavellianism and expressive caregiving emerged as the only significant predictor. This predictor was not only significant in itself. Computing a z-score from the unstandardized coefficients and their standard errors revealed, that there was also a marginally significant gender difference in the predictive power of expressive caregiving on Machiavellianism ( $z = 1.68, p = .09$ ).

## 5. Discussion

Results partially confirmed our hypothesis. More frequent recollection of providing emotional care for family members in the family of origin predicted higher levels

**Table 1. Gender differences on the measured variables; results of ANOVAs**

	Men (n=113)		Women (n=282)		F	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Machiavellianism	93.02	12.38	90.01	13.68	4.099	< .05	.23
Instrumental Caregiving	19.40	5.43	21.20	7.58	5.280	< .05	.27
Expressive Caregiving	23.74	6.62	27.05	8.42	13.951	< .001	.43
Unfairness	20.53	8.27	22.78	10.23	4.343	< .05	.24

df = 1 in each case

**Table 2. Pearson's correlations between Machiavellianism and parentification; results (rs) for men (n=113) are above the diagonal and results (rs) for women (n=282) are below the diagonal**

	Machiavellianism	Instrumental Caregiving	Expressive Caregiving	Unfairness
Machiavellianism	–	.071	.252**	.197*
Instrumental Caregiving	.032	–	.500***	.443***
Expressive Caregiving	.051	.590***	–	.429***
Unfairness	.052	.441***	.604***	–

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 3. Dimensions of parentification predicting Machiavellianism; results of multiple linear regressions by gender**

	Men (n=113)			Women (n=282)		
	Unstandardized Coefficients		$\beta$	Unstandardized Coefficients		$\beta$
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Instrumental Caregiving	-.265	.253	-.116	-.002	.135	-.001
Expressive Caregiving	.466	.205	.249*	.051	.137	.031
Unfairness	.211	.159	.141	.045	.101	.034
R Square		.082*			.003	

Note: Dependent variable is Machiavellianism; \*  $p < .05$

of Machiavellianism in men. At the correlational level, perception of unreciprocated and unacknowledged efforts to provide support in the family of origin was also associated with Machiavellianism in men.

Before discussing the results, some limitations of the study should be highlighted. No matter how compelling it is to take parentification as the cause and Machiavellianism as the effect, the cross-sectional nature of our study prevents any causal inference. It might be that Machiavellianism – stemming from other sources than emotional parentification – makes men think of their family of origin as an emotional burden to them. Future longitudinal studies could make up for this impairment of the study. Results must be interpreted cautiously out of another reason as well. Since the meaning and outcomes of parentification is highly influenced by cultural factors (East, 2010), the validity of our results is culturally restricted. Cross-cultural studies should remedy this shortcoming of the study.

However, our study is the first that found significant associations between emotional parentification and Machiavellianism in men. With respect to Machiavellianism, the most salient feature of the neglectful and demanding family environment might be unpredictability (Burnett et al., 2006) and chaos (Láng & Birkás, 2014). These families fail to provide a secure base and developmentally appropriate limits and discipline for the child (Byng-Hall, 2002; Olson, 2000). In these situations, any form of emotional support provided by the child towards family members can be considered as an effort to reestablish family stability and regain control over life. However, children's actions in families where parentification occurs should not be viewed as deliberate strivings to take over control. Rather emotional care for and control of others should be considered as an overcompensating self-defense against the schema of unpredictability (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). The above described process could be responsible for the development of the manipulative and controlling interpersonal tactics of Machiavellian individuals.

Premature and pronounced responsibility for the emotional well-being of family members might take a toll

on children's adjustment (McMahon & Luthar, 2007) in several ways. First, destructive parentification – through the missing satisfaction of basic childhood needs – might give way to destructive entitlement (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Machiavellian individuals' exploitativeness and ignorance for morality might represent such a destructive entitlement and might also serve self-defending purposes. Emotional or material abuse of others could be a pre-emptive strike of Machiavellian people to prevent others from hurting them. This idea is in line both with the childhood adversities associated with Machiavellianism (Láng & Lénárd, 2015; Ojha, 2007; Ryumshina, 2003) and with paranoid symptomatology as a reflection of cynical view of human nature in Machiavellian individuals (Christoffersen & Stamp, 1995). Second, destructive parentification might also interfere with the optimal development of empathy (Gracer, 1993). Lack of empathy and other impairments in emotion regulation have been suggested as a salient characteristic of Machiavellian individuals (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Szijjarto & Bereczkei, 2015; Wastell & Booth, 2003).

Our study failed to show association between perceptions of childhood parentification and Machiavellianism in adult women. In our view, the reasons for this can be twofold. On the one hand, detrimental effects of parentification could be expressed differently in men and women. Whereas men usually report higher frequency of externalizing symptoms that include Machiavellianism as well (Muris, Meesters & Timmermans, 2013), women are more prone to internalize. Thus, detrimental effects of childhood parentification might express themselves in women in symptoms like depression or anxiety. E.g., Jones and Wells (1996) found associations between parentification and both narcissism and masochism, but they didn't take possible gender differences into account. On the other hand, gender role socialization can also offer an explanation for the gender differences in our results. Caring for others – including family members – has been deeply embedded in traditional female gender roles. Thus, girls may value and desire to participate in the family as a

caregiver, and might potentially receive more rewarding feedback than boys (Galambos, 2004). As a consequence, girls would collect less destructive entitlement, and accordingly they would be less likely to exploit others and less likely to become a Machiavellian person.

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