Prevailing to the peers' detriment: Organizational constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their peers

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ABSTRACT

Since Christie and Geis's (1970) seminal work suggested that Machiavellians win more and are persuaded less, researchers have debated the merits and faults of Machiavellianism. Recent findings suggest competition over resources lead Machiavellians to secure their superior's approval, promoting their career advancement. However, the strategies Machiavellians use in such contexts have yet to be identified. Social undermining research suggests that undermining one's coworkers might make it difficult for targets of undermining to maintain effective working relationships while promoting a perpetrator's relative status (Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006). Thus, drawing on trait activation theory, we argue that resource constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their coworkers, which might help them achieve higher relative status. Additionally, with increased effort devoted toward undermining one's peers, Machiavellians should be distracted from performing core duties resulting in increased production deviance. Data collected from 170 employees supported our arguments. Our study addresses a gap in the literature by suggesting that Machiavellians successfully navigate competitive work environments by undermining their coworkers. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications for both understanding and mitigating the extended detrimental influence of workplace Machiavellianism.

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1. Introduction

As evinced by Niccolo Machiavelli's writing, there is a longstanding interest in influencing others to attain and retain power or status in organizational life. Christie and Geis (1970), who pioneered the study of Machiavellianism, noted that Machiavellians manipulate more, win more, and are persuaded less by others. This self-interested characterization has drawn scholarly attention from multiple disciplines, including neuroscience (Bagozzi et al., 2013), management (Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009; Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014; Zagenczyk, Restubog, Kiewitz, Kiazad, & Tang, 2014), behavioral ethics (Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2014; Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2014), evolutionary psychology (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996), and of course personality psychology (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Though somewhat dated, Christie and Geis's (1970) initial claims still seem to hold up today, as recently Spurk, Keller,

and Hirschi (2016) found that early career Machiavellians were more likely to be both in a position of leadership and satisfied with their careers.

Machiavellians seem to ascend social and organizational hierarchies through deceit and manipulation, though certain circumstances seem to facilitate their success more so than others. Kuyumcu and Dahling (2014) observed that Machiavellians received positive task performance appraisals from their supervisors when they were forced to compete with their peers over resources. Similarly, in a meta-analysis of the personality–job performance literature Judge and Zapata (2015) observed that disagreeable workers, who are commonly described as having Machiavellian tendencies (Guenole, 2014; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015), were viewed as productive in highly competitive occupations (e.g., being a coach or sports scout, being a financial manager). These findings suggest that the presence of competition motivates Machiavellians to differentiate themselves from their peers. However, with the wealth of evidence linking Machiavellianism to both counterproductive and unethical workplace behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012), it seems likely that these circumstances would motivate Machiavellians to use illegitimate strategies that facilitate their own career advancement, perhaps to the detriment of their peers and organization. Using theory to predict which strategies Machiavellians use in these conditions might

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help practitioners to manage Machiavellians more effectively and reward legitimate performance-enhancing behavior.

Here, we use person-situation interactionist theory to identify strategies that competition over resources motivate Machiavellians to employ, answering calls for more integrative research in behavioral ethics (Hattrup & Jackson, 1996). Drawing on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argue that competitive work conditions, such as those created by a lack of resources for doing one's work (see Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014), motivate Machiavellians to use strategies that would increase their chances of attaining higher status and control over others (Dahling et al., 2009). Further, with increased attention devoted toward attaining status and control over others, less attention would be devoted toward completing one's own tasks. In the next sections, we further delineate these arguments. We begin first with an overview of trait activation theory (TAT) and the evidence supporting it, then describe the focal constructs of our study with regard to TAT, and list the hypotheses stemming from TAT.

2. Theoretical overview

Trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) is a person-situation interactionist model of job performance that links personality traits to job performance outcomes via trait activation, which is "the process by which individuals express their traits when presented with trait-relevant situational cues" (p. 502). To illustrate, suppose a situation arises where an individual needs assistance. This is an opportunity to exercise compassion, which is a behavior that compassionate individuals find either easy to perform, rewarding to do, or possibly both. In these situations, the opportunity to help others would motivate compassionate individuals to offer assistance. Thus, it would be said that individuals high on compassion would have their compassion "activated" leading to helping behavior. Conversely, an individual lacking compassion would be unlikely to help (all things being equal). Extended to whole occupations, compassion would become activated in those occupations providing more opportunities to exercise compassion, resulting in higher productivity for compassionate individuals. Thus, occupations described by situation trait relevance would motivate individuals with relevant tendencies to engage in behaviors they are inclined to perform.

Trait activation theory has been strongly supported. Using both meta-analytic and publicly available data (i.e., the Occupational Information Network's (O*NET) data descriptors; see N. G. Peterson et al., 2001), Judge and Zapata (2015) found that data regarding the importance of trait-relevant occupational characteristics can predict which traits would predict performance in an occupation. For instance, they found that importance ratings for social skills requirements predicted that social traits in the Big Five (e.g., emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness) would be associated with higher job performance ratings. Their findings provide clues about the situational features that might activate these personality traits.

In regard to Machiavellianism, identifying occupational features high in situation trait relevance requires a consideration of the Big Five traits that are most relevant for Machiavellianism. O'Boyle et al. (2012) used meta-analysis to link Machiavellianism to the Big Five, finding as argued elsewhere (Guenole, 2014) that Machiavellianism could be profiled by Big Five traits and narrow facets. In a relative importance analysis, they demonstrated that disagreeableness was by far the most important explanatory factor. This suggests that occupational features that are relevant for disagreeableness should also be relevant for Machiavellianism. Judge and Zapata found that disagreeable individuals received higher performance appraisals in occupations with a high level of competition requirements (e.g., sports scout, financial manager). Applying their findings to Machiavellianism suggests that competitive work environments would activate Machiavellianism. However, the legitimacy of these trait expressions requires an understanding of the Machiavellianism construct.

2.1. Machiavellianism

Considered to be an early political scientist (De Grazia, 1989), Machiavelli encouraged ruthlessly pragmatic strategies for acquiring and sustaining power in organizational life. As scholars examined Machiavelli's writings, most notably *The Prince,* Machiavellianism emerged as a multidimensional personality construct defined by four dimensions: (a) the amoral manipulation of others, (b) distrust in others' intentions, (c) desire for control over others, and (d) a strong desire to status and extrinsic career success (Dahling et al., 2009). Research suggests that Machiavellianism is a potent predictor of unethical and counterproductive workplace behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2012). To attain higher status and control over others, Machiavellians might deceive, charm, threaten, ingratiate, or use other strategies involving impression management or interpersonal manipulation (Nelson & Gilbertson, 1991). Thus, in TAT terms, Machiavellians would employ these strategies in situations that provide opportunities to attain status and exercise control over others. We now turn to situations that we believe would provide Machiavellians with opportunities to use these strategies to satisfy their desires.

2.2. The moderating role of competition over resources

Lacking the necessary resources, equipment, or cooperation to translate effort and ability into valuable outputs is a theme that has long described organizational life (see Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Organizational resource constraints "represent situations or things that prevent employees from translating ability and effort into high levels of job performance" (Spector & Jex, 1998). Peters and O'Connor (1980) identified several constraints such as a lack of job-relevant information, tools and equipment, raw material or supplies, financial support, help from peers, training, or time to do one's work. Legitimate performers need such resources to perform well and so lacking these resources makes it difficult to be productive (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Villanova & Roman, 1993). In such contexts, competition over resources can be intense (Spector & Jex, 1998).

Resource constraints are commonly viewed as impeding performance (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Villanova & Roman, 1993). However, they may also be viewed as motivating opportunistic behavior (Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Kuyumcu and Dahling argued that resource constraints create opportunities to engage in manipulative tactics to garner resources, leaving little for others. Having these resources would help Machiavellians outperform those who avoid manipulative tactics.

Taking this analysis further using TAT (Tett & Burnett, 2003), perceptions of resource constraints should motivate Machiavellians to use egregious status-enhancing strategies because competition over resources provide opportunities to gain status by marginalizing the competition, which can be done via social undermining. Social undermining behavior refers to strategic behavior that hinders, over time, the ability of one's coworkers to establish or maintain effective interpersonal relationships, work-related success, or a favorable reputation with one's peers (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). It is well-established that Machiavellians by their vary nature are willing to do what it takes to satisfy career goals (Dahling et al., 2009; Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Further, as argued elsewhere (Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006; Greenbaum et al., 2014), social undermining behaviors may help perpetrators gain higher relative status. Machiavellians may make their peers look like poor performers by delaying their peers' work, deliberately slow them down by feeding them misleading information, or spreading rumors, because these behaviors would be viewed as instrumental in marginalizing the competition. Thus, we argue that when Machiavellians perceive organizational constraints, they would be motivated to undermine their coworkers whom they distrust and view as threats to their relative status.

Hypothesis 1. Organizational constraints moderate the Machiavellianism–coworker-directed social undermining relationship such that when organizational constraints are high, this relationship becomes stronger.

TAT further suggests that situations providing trait-relevant distractions would drive undesirable trait-relevant behaviors (Tett & Burnett, 2003). By providing more opportunities to use undermining to get ahead, resource constraints would distract Machiavellians from their core duties, resulting in production deviance.

Hypothesis 2. Organizational constraints moderate the Machiavellianism–production deviance relationship such that when organizational constraints are high, this relationship becomes stronger.

Implied in our application of TAT is the notion that there exists an indirect effect of Machiavellianism on production deviance via social undermining that is conditional upon organizational constraints. When Machiavellians perceive organizational constraints, they would be distracted from their core duties, focusing on undermining their peers to get ahead.

Hypothesis 3. The moderating effect of organizational constraints on the relationship between Machiavellianism and production deviance is mediated by social undermining. Specifically, Machiavellianism will have a stronger indirect effect on production deviance when organizational constraints are high compared to moderate or low.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedure

Participating in this study were 170 employees conveniently sampled using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) who were paid $1.44 to participate in this study. Following advice regarding the use of MTurk (Mason & Suri, 2012), a panel of participants was developed in order to select employed workers who would provide adequate effort in our study. To develop this panel, an online survey was hosted through MTurk. Only workers from the United States with an approval rating greater than 98% were granted access to this survey (see Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisiti, 2014), which contained questions regarding demographics, employment status, three personality synonyms (e.g., brave, courageous), and three personality antonyms (e.g., talkative, silent) (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) (Goldberg & Kilkowski, 1985). This was used to screen for inattentive responding (Meade & Craig, 2012). Seven hundred and eighty-three individuals completed this panel survey; 540 (or 68.97%) of which reported working full- or part-time and were also attentive responders. We then sent one email invitation to these 540 participants inviting them to participate in two separate surveys to create a psychological separation (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003, p. 887). One survey measured Machiavellianism and another measured resource constraints, coworker-directed social undermining, and production deviance. Both surveys contained cover stories suggesting that independent research teams were conducting separate investigations. Additionally, we assured response anonymity to reduce any evaluation apprehension biases and also presented items and scales randomly (Fowler, 1993; Ong & Weiss, 2000; Peterson, 2000). From the set of 540 individuals who were invited to participate in these two surveys, 172 completed both the predictor and criteria surveys for an overall response rate of 31.85%.[4] Lastly, we removed two more cases because of inattentive

responding (Meade & Craig, 2012), resulting in 170 individuals who comprised the sample that we subjected to analyses.

The descriptives for the analyzed participants are as follows. We observed an average tenure of 4.24 years with their current organization. Sample job types include education, training, and library services (14.0%), sales (13.5%), and office and administrative support (11.8%). In regard to general demographics, the average age was 32.39 years, 80.6% reported at least some college experience; 78.8% self-identified as Caucasian, and 54.7% self-identified as males. All regions of the US (e.g., Midwest, South, and Northeast) were represented.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Machiavellianism

Dahling et al.'s (2009) 16-item Machiavellian personality scale was used, which measures four dimensions of Machiavellianism: amoral behavior, desire for control over others, desire for status, and distrust of others. We used a 5-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Example items include "I am willing to be unethical if I believe it will help me succeed" (amoral manipulation), "I enjoy being able to control the situation" (desire for control over others), "I dislike committing to groups because I don't trust others" (distrust of others), and "People are only motivated by personal gain" (desire for status). The full 16-item scale was used ($\alpha = 0.89$) to examine aggregate Machiavellianism, consistent with prior research (Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014).

3.2.2. Resource constraints

Constraints were measured using Spector and Jex's (1998) 11-item Organizational Constraints Scale (OCS; $\alpha = 0.90$). Measures began with the prompt: "How often do you find it difficult or impossible to do your job because of…" and were followed by statements regarding a lack of recourses. Example items include, "Poor equipment and supplies?" and "Other employees?" Responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = less than once per month or never; 5 = several times per day).

3.2.3. Coworker-directed social undermining

We modified Duffy et al.'s (2002) 13-item measure of coworker undermining, which originally captures undermining behaviors from the targets' perspective, in order to reflect undermining from the perpetrators' perspective ($\alpha = 0.91$). Participants were asked, "How frequently did you…" followed by the items. Example items include "Compete with any of your coworkers for status and recognition?" and "Belittle any of your coworkers or their ideas?" Responses were made using a 6-point frequency scale (1 = never; 6 = everyday).

3.2.4. Production deviance

We used Spector et al.'s (2006) 3-item measure of production deviance ($\alpha = 0.76$). Participants were asked to report their behavior (e.g., "Purposely did your work incorrectly") on their present job using a 5-point response format (1 = never; 5 = everyday).

3.2.5. Control variables

Research suggests that certain demographic characteristics (age, gender, and tenure) are associated with Machiavellianism (see Wilson et al., 1996), unethical behavior, and counterproductive work behavior (for summary, see Ones & Dilchert, 2013). As such, we controlled for tenure with organization (in years), age (in years), and gender (1 = male, 2 = female). We also directly assessed impression management bias using six items (e.g., "I never swear" and "I always obey laws") from the balanced inventory of desirable responding (Paulhus, 1984) ($\alpha = 0.61$).

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[4] To address the key concern over the low response rates (i.e., missing data bias), we used Little's test of data missingness to determine whether completing either survey alone depended upon what we measured. The results suggested that missing data were missing completely at random $\chi^2(6) = 2.18$, $p = 0.90$. Therefore, there was no evidence of missing data bias (see Newman, 2009).

3.3. Analytical approach

We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to provide confidence in our measures. We employed an item parceling strategy to reduce our item/parameter ratio relative to the sample size for all constructs except production deviance (as there are only three items) (Hall, Snell, & Foust, 1999). Following guidance by Hall et al. (1999) we used exploratory factor analysis to form parcels for organizational constraints and coworker directed social undermining (Hall et al., 1999). Afterward, a series of CFAs were conducted using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and Sattora-Bentler scaled chi-squares ($S–B\chi^2$) for model comparison purposes (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). To address concerns over common method variance related to impression management bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we used the CFA marker technique (Williams, Hartman, & Cavazotte, 2010). Once the construct validity of our measurement model was established, we tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 using moderated multiple regression analyses and mean centered predictor and moderating variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Lastly, we used Preacher and colleagues' (2007) PROCESS macro to test Hypothesis 3, which provides estimates of indirect effects and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals at different levels of the proposed moderating variable.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analyses

Descriptive statistics for study variables are provided in Table 1. The initial CFA model, which contained a latent impression management bias factor, indicated unacceptable fit [$S–B\chi^2_{(82)} = 176.30$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.88; SRMR = 0.08], which is common when testing for method effects (Williams et al., 2010). Nevertheless, subsequent testing for method effects related to impression management bias failed to improve model fit. Thus, we omitted the impression management bias measure and tested the fit of our substantive measurement model, which was acceptable [$S–B\chi^2_{(71)} = 146.12$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.90; SRMR = 0.06]. We then proceeded to test our hypotheses.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that constraints would moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and coworker-directed social undermining such that the relationship would become stronger when constraints were high rather than low. Following procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991), we regressed coworker-directed social undermining on the centered main effects of our control variables (gender, age, and tenure) in step 1. We then regressed coworker-directed social undermining on centered organizational constraints and Machiavellianism scores in step 2 to control for the influence of these focal variables. The interaction term (computed from mean-centered Machiavellianism and organizational constraints scores) was entered as a predictor in step 3. An examination of Table 2, Model 3, reveals that a significant amount of incremental variance was explained by the interaction term, indicating a significant interaction effect linking Machiavellianism and organizational constraints on performance to coworker-directed social undermining. Following the convention from Aiken and West (1991), "high" and "low" levels of organizational constraints on performance were set at +1 and −1 SD around the mean. In support of Hypothesis 1, the relationship between Machiavellianism and coworker-directed social undermining was stronger when constraints were high (0.52; simple slopes $t = 6.67$, $p < 0.001$) compared to low (0.08; $t = 1.04$, $p = 0.30$).

Table 1
Correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.45 (0.50)	–						
2. Age	32.39 (9.86)	–	–					
3. Tenure	4.24 (3.98)	–	0.57**	–				
4. Machiavellianism	2.56 (0.66)	−0.18*	−0.22**	−0.25**	(0.89)			
5. Organizational constraints	1.95 (0.75)	−0.09	−0.11	−0.08	0.41**	(0.90)		
6. Coworker-directed social undermining	1.44 (0.55)	−0.17*	−0.13	−0.09	0.52**	0.53**	(0.91)	
7. Production deviance	1.34 (0.60)	−0.10	−0.12	−0.13	0.37**	0.50**	0.54**	(0.76)

Note: $n = 170$. Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Each p value is from a two-tailed test.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Results for regression analyses on coworker-directed social undermining.

	Model 1 B (SE)	Model 2 B (SE)	Model 3 B (SE)
Constant	1.44*** (0.04)	1.44*** (0.03)	1.40*** (0.03)
Controls			
Age	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Gender	−0.19*** (0.08)	−0.09 (0.07)	−0.07 (0.07)
Tenure	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
Predictors			
Machiavellianism[a]		0.30*** (0.06)	0.30*** (0.06)
Organizational constraints[a]		0.28*** (0.05)	0.20*** (0.05)
Machiavellianism × Org constraints			0.22*** (0.05)
F	2.64	21.91***	23.42***
R^2	0.05	0.40	0.46
ΔF		48.55***	18.98***

[a] Variables were mean-centered prior to analyses; standard errors in parentheses; $n = 170$. Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Each p value is from a two-tailed test.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3
Results for regression analyses on production deviance.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Constant	1.32***	1.34***	1.30***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Controls			
Age	−0.01	−0.00	−0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Gender	−0.11	−0.03	−0.01
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Tenure	−0.01	−0.00	−0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Predictors			
Machiavellianism[a]		0.16* (0.07)	0.17* (0.07)
Organizational constraints[a]		0.34***	0.26***
		(0.06)	(0.06)
Machiavellianism × Org constraints			0.21** (0.05)
F	1.53	13.18***	13.49***
R^2	0.03	0.29	0.33
ΔF		29.85***	10.99***

[a] Variables were mean-centered prior to analyses; standard errors in parentheses; $n = 170$. Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Each p value is from a two-tailed test.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that organizational constraints would moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and production deviance such that the relationship would be stronger when constraints were high rather than low. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the relationship between Machiavellianism and production deviance was stronger when constraints were high (0.37; simple slopes $t = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$) compared to low (−0.04; $t = 0.44$, $p = 0.66$) (see Table 3). Fig. 1 shows the shape of interactions for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the moderating effect of organizational constraints on the relationship between Machiavellianism and production deviance would be mediated by social undermining. This positive indirect effect on production deviance should be strongest when organizational constraints are high compared to moderate or low. To determine if social undermining mediated this effect, we used Model 8 of the PROCESS macro designed by Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes (2007), which tests mediated-moderation. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, Machiavellianism had a stronger indirect effect on production deviance via social undermining when organizational constraints were high (*indirect effect* = 0.22, 95%CI: 0.08, 0.40) compared to both moderate (*indirect effect* = 0.14, 95%CI: 0.07, 0.24) and low (*conditional indirect effect* = 0.06, 95%CI: 0.01, 0.14).
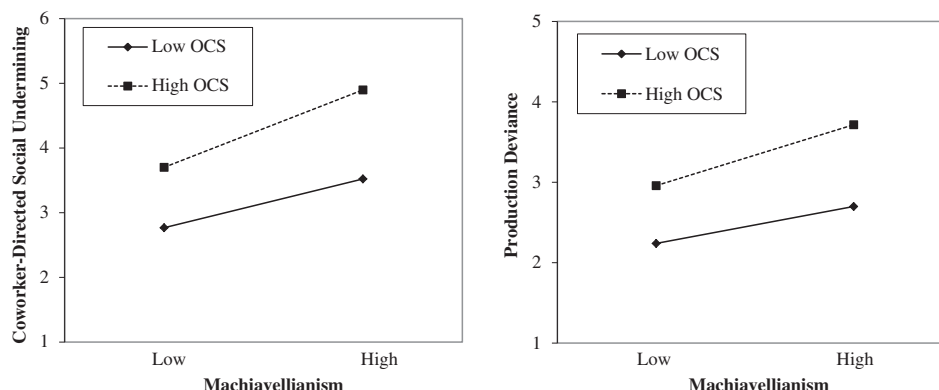
5. Discussion

In using a person-situation interactionist approach to examine dispositional and situational drivers of unethical and counterproductive behavior, our study addresses calls for more precisely predicting these important behaviors (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2012). Relying on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argued that organizational constraints motivate Machiavellians to view their coworkers as threats to be marginalized, which furthers TAT as a theoretical frame for researchers and practitioners to adopt. Focusing in on Machiavellians' perceptions of resource constraints, we successfully demonstrated that constraints motivate Machiavellians to increasingly undermine their coworkers resulting in reduced production deviance. By undermining their peers in a context that promotes competition, Machiavellians might achieve higher relative status (Duffy, Shaw, et al., 2006) while also harming organizational wellbeing (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Additionally, when Machiavellians perceived low resource constraints, they did not engage in social undermining and were no more counterproductive. By suggesting it is in these contexts that Machiavellians engage in social undermining and production deviance, our study provides strong support for person-situation interactionist perspectives such as TAT.

These findings, along with a growing body of literature on workplace Machiavellianism (e.g., Belschak, Den Hartog, & Kalshoven, 2015; Gustafson, 2000), call for more nuance regarding claims that Machiavellianism can, in certain contexts, be an organizational asset. While research clearly shows that Machiavellianism can come with self-serving benefits (e.g., ascending to leadership positions and higher career satisfaction; see Spurk et al., 2015), our research suggests that contexts activating Machiavellianism actually harm organizational functioning (see also Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Thus, by improving our ability to predict these important outcomes (Judge & LePine, 2007), our study brings clarity and nuance to understanding the value of workplace Machiavellianism.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings are in line with the literature on social influence processes (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1998) and workplace Machiavellianism (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Greenbaum et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2012; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2012), which largely views Machiavellians as individuals with questionable reciprocity styles (Grant, 2013). However, our study fills a gap by suggesting that resource constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their peers, resulting in production deviance. Additionally, our findings add nuance to the notion that trait-relevant situations will predict which traits are likely to generate value for an occupational setting (Judge &

Fig. 1. Interaction of Machiavellianism and organizational constraints on coworker-directed social undermining and production deviance.

Zapata, 2015). A key assumption guiding prior research has been that individuals harboring relevant traits for an occupation use strategies that benefit key stakeholders because trait-relevant situations motivate these individuals to engage in productive behavior. Our findings suggest that this assumption may require a caveat when applied to occupations described by high competition requirements or to traits related to illegitimate strategies. Victims of social undermining experience poorer work attitudes, feel less able to voice concerns, are more likely to be absent from work, hold desires to leave their work setting, and work less effectively with others (Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006; Frazier & Bowler, 2015). As the presence of competition motivates Machiavellians to engage in social undermining, it seems highly unlikely that Machiavellians would be an asset in work situations or occupations described by high levels of competition requirements. Furthermore, resource competitions may promote a vicious cycle where undermined employees view their coworkers as unsupportive, leading a proportion of these individuals to continue undermining others. Consistent with this notion, though not hypothesized a priori, we found that constraints motivated a proportion of non-Machiavellians to engage in social undermining and production deviance. Future research investigating this possibility may also look into how resource constraints foster paranoid cognition in the workplace (Chan & McAllister, 2014), leading some employees to believe, rightly, that a few of their coworkers are plotting against them. Thus, by suggesting that situation trait relevance does not consistently identify valuable personality traits, our findings offer interesting avenues for future research. Specifically, there seems to be fertile ground for considering how social influence, social comparison, social exchange, and multiple stakeholder theories might complement trait activation theory in studying career success.

Lastly, though we framed our model using TAT, evolutionary psychology may provide a richer perspective (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014). From this perspective, Machiavellianism represents a specialized adaptation (i.e., consistent use of manipulation) for solving problems (e.g., attaining resources and navigating social hierarchies; Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015) of which our model describes a specific application (i.e., undermining coworkers to promote one's career). These patterns might also occur in non-work social spheres. Additionally, evolutionary psychology suggests robust sex differences in interpersonal aggression (see Archer, 2004), such as those we have studied. Applied to our model, male Machiavellians should engage in higher undermining. Indeed, a re-analysis of our data supported this interaction effect.[5] Though identified post-hoc, this finding is corroborated elsewhere (see Spector & Zhou, 2014). Thus, we encourage researchers to consider evolutionary psychology in both developing and refining their models linking personality traits to social behavior (see also Arvey & Li, 2016; Ilies, Arvey, & Bouchard, 2006).

5.2. Practical implications

The weight of research on Machiavellianism suggests that Machiavellians create a toxic and dysfunctional work environment where they can prevail to the detriment of their peers. Though effective employee selection mechanisms may keep Machiavellians out of the workplace, we will focus on how Machiavellians might be managed more effectively. When evaluating employees, managers might consider gathering relevant evidence for determining the value add of performance, such as through the use of due process performance appraisals (Folger, Konovsky, & Cropanzano, 1992). In this regard, due process performance appraisals (Folger et al., 1992; Taylor, Tracy, Renard, Harrison, & Carroll, 1995), which promote judgments based on relevant evidence, should reduce the chances that Machiavellians are rewarded for counterproductive behavior. To gather evidence for substantiating these ratings, supervisors may consider using peer reports to inform their

judgments, which can be valuable for substantiating performance and evaluating potential leadership success (Norton, 1992; see Spurk et al., 2015). Of course, managers should first develop a dialogue with their subordinates and agree to this practice as a fair standard of evaluating performance (Mannix, Neale, & Northcraft, 1995). Having gained buy-in, supervisors could then obtain reports as to whether a specific employee has intentionally helped or harmed another coworkers' success. By using peer reports to make judgments, due process performance appraisals might create a work environment where workers feel safe voicing concerns, making social undermining an ineffective strategy for gaining higher relative status (Kuyumcu & Grandey, 2013). Taylor et al. (1995) found that employees treated to a due process performance appraisal, though receiving lower evaluations, had more favorable reactions (e.g., believing the system was fair, resulted in accurate evaluations, and wanting to stay with the organization). Taylor et al. also found that, compared to managers who did not work with a due process performance appraisal system, managers who did use due process performance appraisals reported a greater ability to resolve work problems, higher satisfaction with the system, higher job satisfaction, and more accurately described performance. Due process performance appraisals should help managers curb undermining with the added benefits of promoting a work environment where employees develop a functional kind of *pronoia*, or the feeling that their coworkers conspire to promote their career success (Goldner, 1982).

5.3. Limitations

Our findings should be appreciated with regard to key limitations. First, our study was correlational and limited by the use of self-reports, so future research employing the use of longitudinal multisource designs drawing on objective data would more rigorously evaluate our claims that constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their peers, distract Machiavellians from their duties, and facilitate Machiavellians' career success. Such a study would also advance our own by exploring the processes through which Machiavellians select targets to undermine. As Machiavellians seem particularly attuned to negative emotions (Bagozzi et al., 2013), widespread resource constraints, which would be quite frustrating (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014), should lead Machiavellians to target and undermine peers who are having negative reactions, such as individuals with low organization-based self-esteem (i.e., a negative evaluation of personal adequacy and worthiness as an organizational member) (Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010). Alternatively, Machiavellians may select higher-status coworkers to undermine because they are envious (Vecchio, 2005). Which, if any, of these strategies help Machiavellians achieve higher relative status and facilitate their career success has yet to be demonstrated.

Similarly, an alternative hypothesis that went untested is that constraints motivate Machiavellians to charm and flatter their superiors, which is another social influence strategy that might facilitate higher performance appraisal ratings. However, we chose not to investigate this hypothesis as prior research suggests that Machiavellians, who indiscriminately engage in impression management strategies, are unlikely to effectively charm their supervisors (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). Thus, we did not see this as a fruitful avenue to pursue. Another interesting hypothesis is that certain organizational cultures deliberately create competitive work environments by constraining resources to promote direct competition with one's coworkers (e.g., Enron). While we could not test this proposition in our study, it is important to note that this is not inconsistent with our claim that constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their peers. In fact, our study suggests that such organizations, by emphasizing the egregious pursuit of self-interest, are likely to undermine their own long-term interest and so we call for more research on these networked effects and impact.

A final limitation concerns our reliance on a sample obtained from the United States, which is a culture that has strongly favored

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[5] The results of this analysis can be made available by request. Please contact the lead author.

individualistic behavior (Hofstede, 2001). With regard to our model, individualistic cultures tend to promote competition within groups while collectivistic cultures promote cooperation (see Earley & Gibson, 1998). Individualism might favor egregiously competitive behavior, such as social undermining. Thus, future research addressing the multilevel role of the individualism–collectivism dimension is needed.

6. Conclusion

Machiavellianism is a trait profile that, while counterproductive, seems to be instrumental in furthering a careerist agenda. We found that organizational constraints motivate Machiavellians to undermine their coworkers and shirk their duties, the former of which may help Machiavellians attain status while the latter will harm organizational productivity. Our results support the notion that Machiavellians increasingly act in ways that simultaneously further their own self-interests while undermining the wellbeing of their organization. They prevail to the detriment of their peers. Managers witnessing a resource crunch in their organization should be especially vigilant, taking evidence-based steps to mitigate such dysfunctional organizational behavior, such as using due process performance appraisals.

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