In Their Natural Habitats: When Machiavellian Leaders Cannot Behave.

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**Abstract**

Leaders who tend to engage in self-serving behaviour (SSB) entail negative consequences such as lower

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Complex social norm systems are rules and standards that guide human behavior in groups (Cialdini, 2001; Pepitone, 1976) and are unique to human beings (Tomasello and Rakoczy, 2003; Fehr and Rockenbach, 2004; Gintis, 2003; Ostrom, 2000; Sethi and Somanathan, 1996; Fehr and Fischbacher, 2003). Abiding to social norms is generally considered desirable (Hoffman, 1977; Freud, 1990) as doing so is associated with good character [hoffman, 1977; freud, 1990] and helps both building and maintaining functional societies [ref]. For instance, in law and policy making …

[example: law and policy making, EU]

Yet, people often choose to violate norms (Köbis, van Prooijen, Righetti, and Van Lange, 2016) and engage in corrupt collaboration (Weisel and Shalvi, 2015) such as bribery (International Monetary Fund, 2016; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016), as well as other consequences including hindrance of economic growth (Mauro, 1995) and undermining the legitimacy and capacity of governments (Rothstein, 2011). For instance, corrupt police entities that cooperate with drug cartels …

[example: drug cartels]

Here we argue that a) divergent selective pressures of the social environments people are in determine behaviors that signal ‘being a good partner’ and that b) cooperation is not prosocial per se but that it critically depends on both the possibility to choose partners and the social environment.

Previous research highlighted the importance of interpersonal variables in predicting cooperation through morality goals. As people like to think of themselves as moral beings (Bazar, Amir, and Ariely, 2008; Jordan, Mullen, and Nurninghan, 2011; Abeler, Becker, and Falk, 2014; Abeler, Nosenzo, and Raymond, 2016) and care about what others think of them (Lacetera and Macis, 2010; Utikal and Fischbacker, 2013; Gausel and Leach, 2011), ﻿ moral traits dominate [abele and wojciszke, 2014; cottrell, neuberg li, 2007; landy, piazza, Goodwin, 2016; landy, uhlmann, 2016; peeters, 1992, wojciszke, abele, baryla, 2009]. When choosing social partners, people prefer to interact with others they can rely on and cues of morality are a good indicator of ‘being a good partner’ [abele and wojciszke, 2014; baumard et al, 2014; cottrell, neuberg li, 2007; landy, piazza, Goodwin, 2016; landy, uhlmann, 2016; peeters, 1992, wojciszke, abele, baryla, 2009]. For instance, among traits such as being warm and sociable [Goodwin, 2015], people prefer to interact with others who signal being trustworthy [hoffman, 1977; freud, 1990], one of the building blocks of relationships (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007). Importantly, rule-following behavior is one such signal of trustworthiness [hoffman, 1977; freud, 1990; everett, crockett, pizarro, 2016; baumard et al, 2014]. For example, organizations in the free market such as Fairtrade and Tony’s Chocoloneley use their trademarks …

[example: companies collaborating in the free market]

This example depicts signaling trustworthiness as inherently positive, but whether people evaluate such cues of morality positively depends on both the context [melnikoff & bailey, 2018] and the moral goals people have [everett, crockett, pizarro, 2016; baumard et al, 2014].

When people are in a group of potential interaction partners, reciprocity and reputation concerns become more salient as, according to biological market theory, people prefer to interact with others who are most able and inclined to benefit others [barclay, 2013; andre & baumgard, 2011; baumgard & andre, 2013]. Benefits can take on the form of wealth, mutual gain, talents, and resources that can operate on an individual and national level [Hirschman, 1987; Montesquieu, 1951]. For instance, in human-gatherer societies, those who share their spoils formed more profitable relationships than those who did not [gurven, allen-arave, hill, hurtado, 2000]. Nowadays, organizations such as Fairtrade and Tony’s Chocoloneley …

[example: fairtrade and tony’s]

Importantly, providing people with the freedom to seek out trustworthy partners and abandon free-riders helps to develop and safeguard cooperation (Efferson, Roca, Vogt, & Helbing, 2016; Rand, Arbesman, & Christakis, 2011), and therefore individuals benefit more from cooperating than defecting.

The effects of partner choice have mainly been investigated in cooperation settings using economic games which allow to

**Machiavellianism Promotes Self-Serving Behaviour**

Indeed, as supported by our reasoning above, Machiavellianism has been found to be positively related to negative deviant behaviours such as, for instance, self-serving behaviours and abusive supervision.

**The present study**

We expect both Machiavellianism and a threat of power loss to be positively related to SSB. In addition, we propose that threat of power loss moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and SSB. In other words, we expect threat of power loss to strengthen the relationship between Machiavellianism and SSB.

*Hypothesis 1*: Machiavellianism is positively related to SSB.

*Hypothesis 2*: Threat of power loss is positively related to SSB.

*Hypothesis 3*: Threat of power loss strengthens the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and SSB (see Figure 1).

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a dyadic (i.e., supervisor-employee pairs) cross-sectional survey measuring the dark triad, threat of power loss, and SSB.

**Results**

First, we checked for differences in our sample. Using independent samples t-tests we found statistically significant differences between the online and paper-pencil versions for both supervisors (see Table 1) and subordinates (see Table 2) including Machiavellianism, for instance (*t* = -2.09, *df* = 125, *p* = 0.39, *95% CI* [-.53, -.01]).

**Discussion**

Self-serving behaviour (SSB) is generally comprised of selfish behaviour that promotes an array of negative downstream effects. Therefore, leader SSB is generally undesirable and needs to be detected for the sake of individual employees’ and the organisations’ well-being. For these reasons, we examined the interactive effect of threat of power loss and Machiavellianism on leader SSB.

**Theoretical Implications**

Our study contributed to the contemporary psychological literature by highlighting conditions that promote leader SSB. First of all, the findings on Machiavellianism as an antecedent of leader SSB are partially inconsistent with recent research. The inconsistency stems largely from the difference between our two regression analyses, that is, a) the raw model without any control variables and b) the full model including all controls. First, the results of our raw model have shown that Machiavellianism is positively related to leader SSB. This finding is consistent with the contemporary literature which largely depicts Machiavellians as economically as well as interpersonally self-interested individuals. For instance, on an economic level, Machiavellian individuals took more from others (Jones, 2013; Spitzer et al., 2007) and withheld funds from them

**Strengths and Limitations**

Our study had strengths that are worth to mention. First of all, we made an effort to collect dyadic data. The strength of dyadic data is that it outweighs a huge drawback of self-report measures, that is, one-sided subjectivity. This means that we did not report one subjective perspective but two giving us a better overview when it comes to the actual team dynamics. The fact that we used dyadic data instead of regular one-person survey data further helped us to use more appropriate scales. For instance, we could measure all our independent variables (i.e., Machiavellianism and threat of power loss) on the supervisor side and our dependent variable (i.e., self-serving behaviour) on the employee side. Again, this possibility helped us to obtain a more well-rounded and more adequate perspective on the actual dynamics among supervisors and their employees and, importantly, prevented common-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff, 2003). Hence, in examining self-serving behaviour, researchers might adopt dyadic data to their future study designs as well.

**Practical implications**

By conducting research we intend to gain some practical implications from the results. Anyway, we must be careful when we draw inferences from these findings for they mostly have various limitations that may change the interpretability of the results. Despite these reasonable cautions, we also should consider the potential of doing so to an adequate degree. Our study has potential for such practical implications.

**Conclusion**

Leader self-serving behaviour (SSB) has been associated with a series of negative downstream effects at the group as well as at the organisational level. Therefore, it is necessary to find ways to limit such behaviour. As examined in this study, we found two such antecedents to be positively related to SSB, namely Machiavellianism and threat of power loss. Ultimately, under circumstances of a high threat of power loss we found Machiavellian leaders’ SSB to increase. Organisations might find these insights useful as they can adequately shift their awareness to such leaders and ensure the stability of their power positions.