MULTIDIMENSIONAL MACHIAVELLIANISM CONCEPTUALIZATION

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Abstract: The different variants of manipulation of social behavior have always awakened the interest of psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists. For the contemporary psychology, the term Machiavellianism refers to a facet of the interpersonal behavior defined by a person’s tendency to manipulate the attitude of others to achieve their own interests. These are associated with a cynical view of the human nature in which the expectations and needs of people in the social environment are ignored in a selfish and egocentric way. From a particular personal perspective, Machiavellianism is considered to belong to a “black triad” of the personality together with narcissism and psychopathy, having evil effects on social life. Despite the pejorative meanings that can be attributed to the term Machiavellian, they can represent a way of deeper knowledge of human psychology. It integrates a variant of maladaptive functioning of personality in social life and has a genetic, neurobiological and clinical expression. We aim to comment on the legitimacy of considering Machiavellianism as one of the personality disorders using the diagnostic criteria related to them.

Keywords: Machiavellianism, personality, disorder, black triad, alexithymia

Personality disorders represent a particular sector in the psychiatric nosology and nosography due to their persistent structural conditions of abnormality, clinically manifested by a discontinuous adaptive behavioral deficit, often masked by the tolerance of the others, by special spiritual qualities or by an intellectual level that substantiates a particular versatilitiy within the interpersonal relationships. Within them, the egocentrism of pathological personalities is nourished and promoted also by the deficit in structuring the super-ego, the moral « posture » towards self coexisting with the immoral one towards the others.

The origin of the term « Machiavellianism » is in the work « The Prince » by Niccolo Machiavelli, the Florentine philosopher, historian and diplomat, a work that represents a tribute to Lorenzo de Medici and which is meant to be a guide for conquering and maintaining the power using certain means opposed to the traditional ones (1). However, the use of this term in order to define a psychological structure started only in 1970 and we owe it to Richard Christie and Florence L. Geis.

The psychological traits that characterize an unscrupulous leader, in Niccolo Machiavelli’s view, subsequently have been considered characteristic symptoms of a homonymic personality dominated by the lack of trust in the human nature and the tendency to manipulate in interpersonal relationships, the selfish pursuit of one’s own interests based on the motto « the end justify the means ». This concept has certainly gained more and more interest in the social psychology perspective, the Machiavellian traits are a version to adjust to the pressure, exercised by the social life’s dynamics on the individual. They are not considered able to be correlated to the social class, to different ideologies, nor to the level of intelligence or different versions of success in life.

The Machiavellianism clinical side includes a cynical, suspicious, treacherous and manipulative behavior in the interpersonal relationships, maintained by a selfish detachment from the community norms and values to which are associated anxiety and emotional instability (2). The Machiavellian style can be charming and attractive, but at the same time shallow and obviously interested in competing, in material values and power. It is in a reverse correlation with the faith in the human being and with his moral values or virtues as empathy, honesty, modesty and gratitude, being animated only by selfish motivations. The first attribute, that allows a person with Machiavellian traits to always successfully adapt to the dynamic and roles of life is flexibility, fostered also by the Machiavellian person’s capacity to anticipate the intentions of the persons with which he interacts, a phenomenon known as « theory of mind » (3).

Recent studies plead for the existence of two facets of empathy, a cognitive one, respectively an affective one. The first would correspond to the theory of mind in the meaning of anticipatory understanding and use of emotional experiences and reasoning and judgment of the other, and the second one, by the capacity to experience and share emotions to the other persons (4). Cognitive empathy is also simultaneously an attribute of subclinical psychopathy, subsequently described by Emil Kraepelin as a psychopathic personality. In the same context, Cleckley describes in psychopaths a « semantic aphasia » to which corresponds the incapacity to grant an affective meaning to life’s events and experiences, so they know only the words, but not the music (5). This trait seems to be also common to psychopathy and personalities with...
Machiavellian traits.
The dominant attributes of Machiavellianism suggest – from a personological perspective – the need of a dimensional approach in the event of which the most indicated is the model of five factors - the Big Five – which has been applied to significant populational groups in all the cultures. The five dimensions are Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience. Assessing the Machiavellian behavior through these dimensions, it has been determined a negative correlation with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, as well as with Openness to experience (6). There is no positive correlation with Extraversion either, very probably due to its polarization around emotional stability. Extraversion associated with emotional instability, therefore with a high Neuroticism, is characteristic to Machiavellianism, and explains the incisiveness and domination tendencies on those around them. The low values of Neuroticism in this association do not characterize Machiavellianism because they mean affective stability, self-confidence, self-determination, hedonic and relaxation abilities. Consequently, Neuroticism is a dimensional attribute specific to Machiavellianism.

Recent studies add to the Machiavellian traits also alexithymia, that is the individual’s incapacity to express through words emotions and feelings (8). In addition, there are encountered difficulties also in understanding one’s own emotions, low creativity and lack of introspection abilities. Those with Machiavellian traits, being incapable to develop emotional relationships, are leading their existence by establishing two patterns of interpersonal relationships, going from one extreme to the other, either dependence and instability in time, or absolute social isolation. The “Emotional Inability” of the Machiavellian person explains partly the ways in which relates to the others. The association with alexithymia has influenced the introduction of the concept of “volutinal Machiavellianism”, which explains also the lack of empathy.

Indeed, as it has been illustrated in the previous paragraphs, the concept of Machiavellian personality is dominated by Emotional detachment from others and lack of interpersonal warmth, a close description of alexithymic individuals. A second emotional attribute, which may be considered as a defining one for Machiavellianism, is Anhedonia. This term, defined as the incapacity to feel pleasure, means also a diminished sensitivity to events that are considered aversive. Anhedonia can also be considered a vulnerability factor or a defence mechanism and it is positively correlated with the lack of empathy.

It is considered to exist a primary Machiavellianism with early manifestations and related to the structure of the personality, and a secondary one which can be regarded as a defence mechanism and may characterize the behavior of depressed patients and of those with schizophrenia. They are not capable to interpret the intentions and emotions of others around them or they change their significance.

Paulhus includes Machiavellianism in a black triad of personality, next to narcissism and subclinical psychopathy, and the joint element which confers them malefic influences on others around them, being the manipulation, lacking any kind of regret or remorse. Narcissism and psychopathy are assigned today to personality disorders dominated by selfishness and egocentrism, exploitative and hostile style in interpersonal relationships, emotional detachment from one’s peers, poorly structured super-ego which do not allow be aware of one’s own defects and cultivate a false and vulnerable image and self-esteem. Conceptually, Machiavellianism is associated to two types of pathological personalitities, but there are differences from a dimensional perspective that must be commented upon. Thus, psychopathic personalities, the narcissistic ones and those with Machiavellian traits, are encountered on the territory of affective detachment and lack of affective resonance in the relationships with others. From the perspective of the Big Five model, the low level of Agreeableness is characteristic to all the three structural versions, and those with Machiavellian traits and the psychopaths have in common also a low level of Conscientiousness. While Machiavellianism means also a high level of Neuroticism, its level is minimum in psychopaths, in their case the lack of anxiety and charm confers them an antisocial position of first rank in the reference trial. On the other hand, the high levels of Extraversion and Openness to experience may partially dim the maladaptive traits of the narcissistic and of the psychopath (7). Therefore we may define as fundamental traits of Machiavellianism the lack of empathy, the high level of alexithymia, dysphoria and anhedonia, cognitive and affective negative empathy, traits assembled around interpersonal duplicity, cynical vision of the surrounding world and lack of morality.

So, there is a double orientation in defining Machiavellianism. On one hand, there are the authors who sustain the independence of Machiavellianism in relation to the other personality disorders and the need to classify it as a distinct entity in the international classifications. On the other hand, other authors are oriented towards the integration of Machiavellianism in the known personality disorders, especially those included in the Black Triad of Personality, Machiavellianism being just another face of them.

As the term assigned to it suggests, Machiavellianism represents a psychological and personological entity of which conceptualization remains further to be desired.

References

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