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**Citation style:** Pilch Irena. (2012). Machiavellianism and Problem-solving Strategies in a Marriage Relationship. "The New Educational Review" (2012, nr 1, s. 324-336).



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# Machiavellianism and Problem-solving Strategies in a Marriage Relationship

# **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to examine the relationships between the level of spouses' Machiavellianism and tendency to use constructive and unconstructive problem-solving strategies in marital conflicts. The study involved 100 married couples. The participants completed Mach IV and the Problem-Solving Strategies Inventory in two versions: self-report and estimation of partner behaviours. Two exploratory path analyses were performed. The analysis of data coming from self-reports proved that Machiavellianism was positively associated with the tendency to use destructive strategies (Escalation and Withdrawal), and negatively with the use of constructive strategies (Loyalty and Dialogue). Higher Machiavellianism of women was related to less frequent use of Dialogue strategy by their husbands. The data obtained through estimations of partner behaviour showed that a higher level of Machiavellianism among husbands was related to their wives' more frequent use of Escalation and Withdrawal, as well as to their less frequent use of Loyalty and Dialogue. The results support the assumption that Machiavellianism may be treated as a factor which makes constructive solving of matrimonial conflicts more difficult.

**Key words:** personality, Machiavellianism, conflict, interpersonal relations, marriage, problem solving.

# **Problem**

Machiavellianism is a personality feature or a behavioural strategy which is manifested in striving for achievement of egocentric goals through manipulating a partner (Fehr, Samsom & Paulhus, 1992; Wilson, Near & Miller, 1996; Jones & Paulhus 2009). A Machiavellian has a negative opinion about people, egoistic motivation and accepts deceptive techniques of social influence. Important elements of Machiavellian personality are: coolness, emotional distance and a lack of empathy (Barnett & Thompson, 1985; Wastell & Booth, 2003). Christie and Geis (1970) approved the above-mentioned Machiavellian features as critical, and named them as "cool syndrome". Those features make it more difficult for a Machiavellian to establish close, warm and long-lasting relations with other people, and they cause a lack of involvement in a relationship. On the other hand, they make it easy to instrumentally treat a partner with coolness and impersonal attitude.

Machiavellians show a strong motivation for achieving personal goals by all available means, refraining from the ethical aspects of their own decisions. As a result, in many experiments, they obtain better scores than non-Machiavellians, who are focused on the partner and on the interaction (Fehr et al., 1992; Wilson et al., 1996). It is otherwise in everyday life situations – here, Machiavellians' advantage becomes problematic. (Hunt & Chonko, 1984; Gable & Topol, 1991; Graham, 1996). Particularly, in the field of close, interpersonal relations (friendships and love relationships) high Machiavellianism of one of the partners may be an obstacle which makes establishing of a relationship difficult, and its quality lower (Pilch, 2007; 2008).

The influence of partners' personality traits on their marriage relationship is shown, first of all, in the interpersonal communication process (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). In a stable relationship, there might be expected differences in the ways of communication and in the preferred strategies of influencing, which are related, among other things, to the level of Machiavellianism of both partners. Communicating with a partner seems to be necessary for the manipulating person to effectively influence his/her partner. Prior research (Pilch, 2008) showed that the higher the level of spouses' Machiavellianism the more often - in their own opinion - they assumed a deprecating style of communication with their partner (aggression, domination, control), and the more seldom they showed support and involvement (showing respect, interest, care, stressing the partner's importance) (Pilch, 2008, p. 185). The above-mentioned differences should also be observed in a conflict situation. A Machiavellian is usually interested, first of all, in his/her own gain and he/she would rather disregard the partner's needs and goals, whereas a non-Machiavellian is focused on the partner, as well as on the good and ethical aspects of the relationship. Therefore, the preferred conflict solving strategies of people who show different levels of Machiavellianism may vary.

In accordance with a two-dimensional classification of conflict solving strategies (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986), all the behaviours which occur in a conflict

situation may be evaluated in two dimensions: constructive/destructive (evaluated from the point of view proper for the sake of relationship) and active/passive (undertaking/refraining from visible behaviours). Therefore, four types of behaviour might be distinguished in a conflict situation: constructive and active behaviours (Dialogue), constructive and passive ones (Loyalty), non-constructive and active (Escalation of conflict) and non-constructive and passive (Withdrawal) (Kriegelewicz, 2003).

It might be expected that a Machiavellian, who is not interested in the partner's needs, will undertake constructive behaviours (Dialogue and Loyalty) which serve for the good of both spouses more seldom than a non-Machiavellian. Such behaviours, as long as they appear, might be motivated by a will to achieve an immediate benefit. At the same time, a Machiavellian, in comparison to a non-Machiavellian, may show active, destructive behaviours (Escalation) more often, because he/she is not interested in refraining from such behaviours for the sake of the relationship. The following hypothesis was subject to verification: Spouses' Machiavellianism is related to the frequency of their using strategies of solving conflicts: negatively – with Dialogue and Loyalty strategies, and positively – with Escalation of conflict strategy (hypothesis 1). This relation may be seen both while analyzing the evaluation of the person's own behaviours (self-report), as well as analyzing the behaviours shown by his/her partner (estimation).

Spouses influence each other and they determine joint communication patterns in their marriage (Plopa, 2005). Machiavellianism of one of the spouses may be related to the communication behaviours of the wife or the husband, thus influencing his/her preferred style of solving conflicts. Having noticed an egocentric attitude of the spouse, his/her emotional coolness, mistrust and disloyalty, the partner of a Machiavellian may – as a sort of revenge – respond with a similar behaviour, limiting the number of constructive behaviours while increasing the number of destructive behaviours in a conflict. It was expected that Machiavellianism of one of the spouses is related to the frequency of the other spouse's use of the strategy for solving matrimonial conflicts: negatively – with Dialogue and Loyalty, and positively – with Escalation of conflict and Withdrawal (hypothesis 2).

# Method

#### **Materials**

Machiavellianism. To measure the level of Machiavellianism, Mach IV scale was used (Christie & Geis, 1970). Mach IV contains 20 statements with answers

based on a 7-grade scale: from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The level of Machiavellianism was indicated by the sum of the score points + 20. Scores in this inventory range between 40 and 160. Higher scores denote higher level of Machiavellianism. The averages were equal to: females M = 86.8, SD = 10.1, males M = 91.0, SD = 13.4). Internal reliability: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.69$ .

Conflict solving strategies. Problem-Solving Strategies Inventory was used in order to determine methods of solving conflicts among married couples (Kriegelewicz, 2003). The questionnaire includes 32 statements which concern behaviours or convictions towards the partner, in situations of conflict. A participant evaluates his/her own behaviour (self-description) or their partner's behaviour (estimation) using a six-grade scale (from "never" to "always"). The tool recognizes four strategies: Dialogue ("Even during an argument, I try to comprehend and to know my partner's point of view"), Loyalty ("When our views on certain issue differ, I prefer to give in so that there will be no quarrel"), Escalation of conflict ("If I am angry with my partner I articulate spiteful remarks about her/him") and Withdrawal ("When my partner's behaviour makes me mad I stop talking to him/her"). The scale reliability in the study was satisfactory (self-description – Dialogue  $\alpha$ =0.88, Loyalty  $\alpha$ =0.8, Escalation of conflict  $\alpha$ =0.85, Withdrawal  $\alpha$ =0.91; estimation – Dialogue  $\alpha$ =0.89, Loyalty  $\alpha$ =0.79, Escalation of conflict  $\alpha$ =0.89, Withdrawal  $\alpha$ =0.92).

# Participants and procedure

The group comprised 100 married couples that had been selected with the use of the "snow ball" procedure. The marriage duration ranged from 1 year to 52 years, and the people's age was from 22 to 76 years. The married couples were raising from 0 to 5 children. The participants had the following education: primary and vocational (25 persons – 12.5%), secondary (96 persons – 48%), and higher education (79 persons – 39.5%). The respondents were given a set of questionnaires with instructions; there were two envelopes: one for the husband and one for the wife. Envelopes with answers were to be sealed and inserted in bigger, collective envelope per one couple. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

# **Results**

Two exploratory path analyses were performed. Models of paths were formed on the ground of modification indexes; non-significant paths were deleted (p=0.05).

The first analysis (model 1) involved data which described conflict solving strategies coming from the self-description part, while the second analysis (model 2) – coming from the partner's behaviour estimation.

The first objective of the analysis was to determine whether and to what extent Machiavellianism of both spouses is related to the frequency of using certain strategies for solving conflicts, as resulting from the self-description part. In model 1, Machiavellianism of husband and wife and marriage duration are treated as exogenous variables, and conflict solving strategies of both spouses constitute endogenous variables. Model 1 with standardized path coefficients is illustrated in Figure 1. Only statistically significant paths ( $p \le 0.05$ ) are identified. The model provided adequate fit to the data (Chi²=34.079, df=37, p=0.607, GFI =0.945, AGFI=0.901).

Relations between spouses' Machiavellianism and strategies used by them for solving matrimonial conflicts (intrapersonal level of analysis) were similar in the women and men groups. Machiavellianism of the wife would be a direct predictor of Escalation (0.35), and an indirect predictor (through mediation of Escalation) for such strategies as: Loyalty (-0.153), Withdrawal (0.193) and Dialogue (-0.096). The higher the level of Machiavellianism of the wife the more often – according to her own opinion – she would use the Escalation and Withdrawal strategies, and the more seldom - the strategies of Loyalty and Dialogue. Machiavellianism of the husband would be a direct predictor of Escalation strategy (0.33), and an indirect predictor (through mediation of Escalation) for such strategies as: Loyalty (-0.218), Withdrawal (0.235) and Dialogue (-0.213). The higher the level of Machiavellianism of the husband the more often – according to his own evaluation – he would use the Escalation of conflict and Withdrawal strategies towards his wife, and the more seldom - the Loyalty and Dialogue strategies. At intrapersonal level (the person's Machiavellianism and strategies used by him/her for conflict solving) the obtained result was partly in accordance with expectations: Machiavellianism would directly influence only the Escalation strategy. In the case of other strategies, an indirect influence was evident. Hypothesis 1 was therefore partially confirmed.

The differences resulting from a respondent's sex were seen in the analysis of the relation between Machiavellianism and conflict solving strategies, as studied at interpersonal level (the persons' Machiavellianism and conflict solving strategies used by her/his partner). Only the wife's Machiavellianism influenced the husband's Dialogue strategy directly and negatively (-0.14). The higher the level of Machiavellianism of the wife, the more seldom, in a conflict situation, the husband uses the Dialogue strategy towards her. Due to the above, hypothesis 2 – given the data coming from self-report – was confirmed only to a limited extent.

Marriage duration influenced only Loyalty shown by the husband (0.16): the longer the marriage duration the more often the husband uses the Loyalty strategy towards his wife. When spouses were describing their own behaviours in a conflict, the influence of their marriage duration on those behaviours was very small.

The second objective of the analysis was to determine whether and to what extent Machiavellianism of both spouses is related to conflict solving strategies used by them, as resulting from the partner's behaviours estimation. In model 2, Machiavellianism of the husband and the wife and their marriage duration are again treated as exogenous, while the conflict solving strategies of both spouses, determined with the use of estimation, are endogenous variables. Model 2 with standardized path coefficients is illustrated in Figure 2. The model fit was adequate (Chi²=38.753, df=37, p=0.391, GFI =0.936, AGFI=0.886).

At the intrapersonal level of analysis (the person's Machiavellianism and conflict solving strategies used by that person), the obtained result was not in accordance with expectations. Machiavellianism of the husband and the wife was not an important predictor of their behaviours in a conflict situation, therefore hypothesis 1 – given the data obtained from estimation – should be rejected. However, at interpersonal level (the person's Machiavellianism and conflict solving strategies used by the person's partner) only the effects of men's Machiavellianism were observed. The husband's Machiavellianism was a direct predictor of the conflict Escalation strategy used by his wife (0.29) and indirectly influenced the remaining conflict solving strategies of his wife (Withdrawal 0.196, Loyalty – 0.194, Dialogue – 0.19) and – to a very limited extent – the husband's conflict Escalation strategy (0.057). The higher the level of the husband's Machiavellianism the more often his wife uses Escalation and Withdrawal strategies towards him, and the more seldom she uses strategies such as: Loyalty and Dialogue. The wife's more frequent use of the conflict Escalation strategy resulted in a more frequent choice of the Escalation strategy by her Machiavellian husband. In model 2, based on the data coming from the estimations of the partner's behaviours, hypothesis 2 was confirmed only to a very limited extent.

Marriage duration was a predictor of Escalation strategy used by the husband (0.28) and the wife (0.31) as well as the wife's Loyalty strategy (0.15): the longer the marriage duration, the more often the spouses use the Escalation of conflict strategy towards each other, and the more often the wives use the Loyalty strategy towards their husbands.

### **Discussion**

Although the hypotheses were only partially confirmed, all the associations observed in the study between spouses' Machiavellianism and behaviour strategies in a conflict were up to expectations resulting from the concept of Machiavellianism. In accordance with the data derived from self-description, the higher level of Machiavellianism among women and men is often associated with the more frequent use of conflict Escalation and Withdrawal strategies, and with the less frequent use of Loyalty and Dialogue strategies. Moreover, higher Machiavellianism among women co-exists with less frequent use of Dialogue strategy of their husbands. In accordance with the data obtained from partners' behaviours estimations, husbands' higher Machiavellianism is related to the more frequent use of Escalation and Withdrawal strategies by their wives, and with their less frequent use of Loyalty and Dialogue strategies. Machiavellianism of both spouses might be a factor which makes constructive solving of conflicts in marriage more difficult and which has an influence on both the strategies applied by a Machiavellian spouse and on the behavioural patterns used by his/her partner. Such an influence is not only seen in direct effects but also in indirect effects. By increasing the number of behaviours which are undesirable from the relationship wellbeing point of view (Escalation strategy), Machiavellianism contributes to the reduction of the number of desirable behaviours (Loyalty and Dialogue strategies), and to more frequent use of non-constructive strategy of Withdrawal.

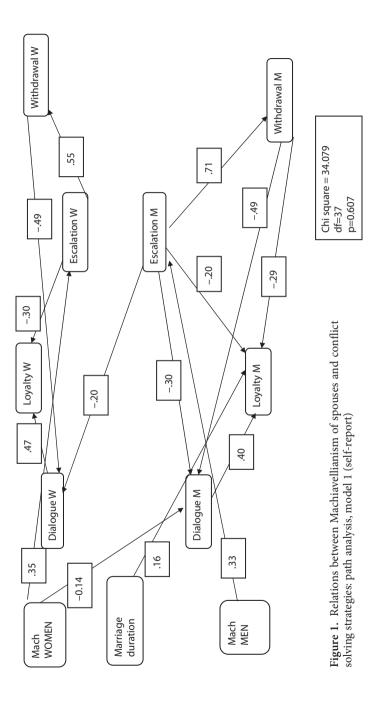
Escalation strategy seems to be the least favourable from the spouses' common interest point of view. Another non-constructive strategy – Withdrawal – may not necessarily lead to conflict escalation or to a lack of good solutions in the future. It may allow for "withstanding" the partner's negative emotions and it does not hurt the partner's feelings. Although Withdrawal strategy may not be accepted by a partner, in certain situations it may be recognized as a "lesser evil". Conflict Escalation (associated with Machiavellianism in a special way) may bring a temporary relief to a spouse who is using it, thanks to venting of negative emotions; also, it may bring certain profits to such a person when the attacked partner agrees on some solution unfavourable to him/her. However, this strategy may not be favourable to the marriage relationship as a whole.

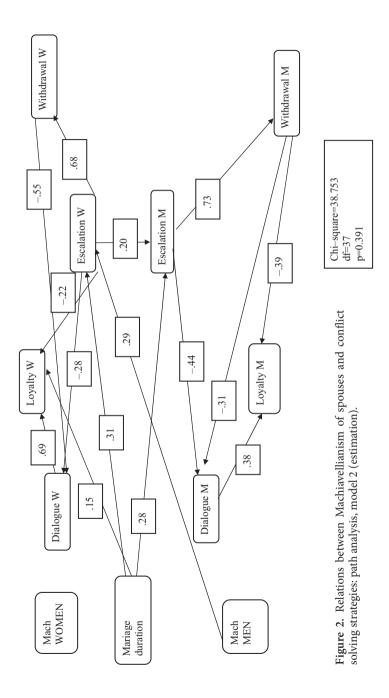
The relation of Machiavellianism to the use of certain conflict solving strategies as used by a Machiavellian spouse could only be seen in the analysis of data coming from the self-description part (model 1). There are no differences in that matter between the groups of men and women. The spouses of Machiavellians (both men and women) did not assign them a more frequent use of conflict

Escalation strategy (model 2), which is not in accordance with Machiavellians' self-estimation. Perhaps Machiavellians, masters at creating their own image (Zaidman, & Drory, 2001; Lopes & Fletcher, 2004; Sherry, Hewitt, Besser, Flett & Klein, 2006), are able to "camouflage", pertinent to that style of conflict solving, aggressive, hostile, competing and ignoring their partner's emotions, activities, e.g. by providing their external causes ("If it depended on me ..."), adding an "altruistic" motivation ("I had to yell at you although I don't like it – for your own good"), or blaming the partner ("I would never have said it if you had not provoked me"). Being subject to the said manipulations, partners of Machiavellians attribute behaviours to Machiavellians that lead to conflict escalation, to the same extent as the spouses of non-Machiavellians do . Such an interpretation of the results is in accordance with the widespread opinion about extraordinary self-presentation talents of Machiavellians, and it also shows that they put a great deal of importance to working out their image. According to Wilson et al. (1996), Machiavellians in the long-term relationships are either destined to failure or achieve success thanks to a sort of "mimicry" which entails "pretending" to be a non-Machiavellian. The presented results rather provoke suspicion that such pretending activities might be undertaken by Machiavellian spouses and that even in long-term relationships they might end in success. The results are in line with the results of the study where the wives of Machiavellians evaluated their husbands' tendency to behaviours proving support and involvement in the relationship as higher than it was in the case of the wives of non-Machiavellians; although the husbands thought of themselves quite the opposite, which may also be interpreted as a result of effective self-presentation efforts undertaken by Machiavellian husbands (Pilch, 2008).

The relation between Machiavellianism of one of the spouses and the frequency of using certain conflict solving strategies by the partner depended on the source of data. In model 1 (data obtained from self-description), the higher the level of Machiavellianism of the wife the lesser the inclination towards Dialogue shown by her husband. In model 2 (data from estimation of the partner's behaviours), the higher the level of Machiavellianism of the husband, the lesser the inclination towards conflict Escalation of his wife.

In comparison to husbands with lower Machiavellianism, Machiavellian husbands perceive their wives as more inclined to non-constructive, conflict escalating behaviours (model 2). At the same time, Machiavellian husbands see similar conflict Escalation inclinations in themselves (model 1). Therefore, we can suspect that unfavourable for the relationship, non-constructive behaviours of the wives of Machiavellians may be a reaction to their husbands' actions, which aims at "getting even" (although those women themselves do not have to be aware of it). At the





same time, Machiavellian wives do not perceive their husbands as more inclined to conflict Escalation (model 2), although they see such a tendency in themselves, similarly to Machiavellian husbands (model 1). Where does this difference come from? Maybe, towards women – known as "experts of sustaining the bond", more severe evaluation criteria were used than it was in the case of men. The same words if spoken by men seem to be "neutral" while if spoken by more delicate and sensitive creatures as women, seem to be brutal and insulting. The said, hypothetical difference associated with stereotypes assigned to sexes, by influencing evaluation of certain behaviours, might have been seen in the above results.

Husbands of Machiavellian wives, in comparison to husbands of non-Machiavellians, perceive themselves as less inclined to using Dialogue strategy (model 1). Similar relation in the case of wives was not observed. Again, in this case, the said difference might be tried to be explained with the differences in the roles played in marriage by men and women. Dialogue is the most desired strategy for solving conflicts, which aims at the spouses' mutual benefit. Maybe, in a marriage type of relationship, women – the wives of Machiavellians (who are more interested in the good of the family) do not limit "as part of a revenge" a constructive Dialogue, because they feel to a greater extent as those who are responsible for the family's well-being. Women are also to a greater extent than men, trained in such behaviours that are in accordance with the role of a wife.

Therefore – in view of the presented results – the wives of Machiavellian husbands may (in the opinion of their husbands) more often than other wives, use the strategy of Escalation, but at the same time they do not limit the constructive strategy of Dialogue towards their partners. However, the husbands of Machiavellian wives, most likely, are less inclined than other husbands to conduct a Dialogue, but they do not abuse the non-constructive strategy of Escalation towards their wives.

Associations of spouses' Machiavellianism with their behaviours in conflict situations depended on the source of evaluation of those behaviours. Whenever the behavioural strategies in a conflict situation were determined based on the spouse's behaviour estimations, Machiavellianism of the wife and husband was not related with her or his behaviours. But, whenever the strategies were determined based on self-description, the influence of Machiavellianism of both spouses on the behaviours presented by them was clear, both in men and women groups. Machiavellianism was then a predictor for using Escalation of conflict strategy and also indirectly influenced the frequency of using strategies such as: Dialogue, Loyalty and Withdrawal. High Machiavellianism supported the occurrence of nonconstructive strategies and limited the frequency of using the constructive ones.

Relations of spouses' Machiavellianism to their partners' behaviours in a conflict situation were different in the groups of men and women. The husbands of Machiavellian women showed a lesser tendency for Dialogue, however, this relation concerned the data obtained from self-estimations. The wives of Machiavellian men more often than other women would use conflict Escalation strategy towards their husbands, however, the source of the said relation was the data obtained from estimations of their behaviours.

Differences in the roles of a husband and a wife, and therefore the differences in expectations towards them, cause the influence of a Machiavellian orientation of each spouse on the marriage and family well-being, to be different. The above-mentioned differences encourage undertaking of research on strategies in dealing with difficulties resulting from the partner's Machiavellian inclinations, with inclusion of very probable differences between sexes in that field.

It is difficult, based on evaluations that are naturally subjective and one-sided, to deeply investigate compounded relations between spouses. This study has shown that Machiavellianism of spouses is a feature that may be related to the strategies used by partners in solving matrimonial conflicts.

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