# It is Better to be Feared than Loved: The Link between Machiavellianism and Attachment

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## Abstract

This research wanted to investigate the link between Machiavellianism and attachment styles. Because most research focuses on the Dark Triad and attachment style, not much research has been done on the link between just Machiavellianism and attachment styles. Furthermore, Machiavellianism is associated with immoral behavior, which means it was useful to check whether attachment style could act as a protective or risk factor. 227 participants ($M_{age}$ = 31.3; *SD* = 14.77; 30.4% male) from a non-clinical population completed the Five Factor Machiavellianism Inventory and the Relationship Questionnaire, which differentiates between four types of attachment style: secure, dismissive, fearful and preoccupied. It was hypothesized that Machiavellianism would be positively associated with a dismissive attachment style and a fearful attachment style and negatively associated with a secure and preoccupied attachment style. A multiple regression was conducted, which showed no significant results. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that any relationship exists between Machiavellianism and attachment styles. This implies that attachment style cannot be used to prevent the development of Machiavellian traits. For future research, it is recommended to use a forensic sample, and to use a different questionnaire to measure attachment styles.


*Keywords*: Machiavellianism, secure attachment, fearful attachment, dismissive attachment, preoccupied attachment

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Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *Il Principe* to teach royals how to rule over their subjects (Machiavelli, 1532). The downfall of his own regime was the motivation to write a treaty on how to gain and keep power. This book eventually became one of the most influential works on political power. Machiavelli made some quite controversial statements, such as 'the end justifies the means' or 'it is much better to be feared than to be loved'.

Christie and Geis (1970) used Machiavelli as an inspiration for what they eventually called Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulative behavior, pragmatic and immoral beliefs, and lack of emotional cognition and low emotional intelligence (Christie & Geis, 1970; Austin et al., 2007). High Machiavellians have a superficial charm, which is why they can be charismatic leaders (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). Machiavellianism can be seen as a personality trait, meaning that everyone is capable of displaying Machiavellian behavior (Wilson et al., 1996; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). This means that some people show more of such behavior than others. Machiavellianism is part of the Dark Triad, which is the umbrella term for Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. The concept of the Dark Triad was first introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002).

Bowlby (1979) developed attachment theory, in which an attachment style is the emotional bond and connection with others, which influences long-term relationships. One's attachment style is determined in childhood, mainly by the opportunity and quality of caregiving (Bowlby, 1979). Generally, four attachment styles can be distinguished. A secure attachment style is the result of a positive and affirming bond with an individual's primary caregiver, which leads to a higher amount of prosocial behavior and commitment (Jonason et al., 2014). Securely attached people have the skills necessary to build and sustain healthy and

stable relationships, have greater emotional stability and have a higher relationship satisfaction overall (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018).

Furthermore, three insecure attachment styles can be identified. Firstly, the dismissive attachment style. When caregivers act unresponsive and detached, one's emotional needs are not met, which leads to the rejection of emotional bonds altogether (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Van Der Watt, 2014). People with a dismissive attachment style reject emotional relationships or minimize their importance, which means they are self-reliant and independent (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). As a result, individuals with a dismissive attachment style usually avoid intimate relationships (Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018). Dismissive people also seem to lack the need to belong (Bartholomew, 1990). Another insecure attachment style is the fearful attachment style. Individuals that display this attachment style are often anxious about forming intimate bonds with others and tend to avoid social situations (Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018). Fearful individuals are hesitant to disclose information about themselves to others, they typically push and pull on their loved ones (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018). The last attachment style is the preoccupied style. Preoccupied individuals often experience a strong fear of separation and have a strong preference for having others close in proximity to them, which can lead to emotional dysregulation (Bloxsom et al., 2021). They believe that they are not worthy of support and love from caregivers or other loved ones because they are unsure about their self-value (Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021; Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018).

Research has been done on the relationship between attachment and the Dark Triad. For example, Tajmirriyahi et al. (2021) found that Dark Triad individuals have dysfunctional bonds with caregivers. Machiavellians usually have the worst quality relationship, according to this research. When specifically looking at the different attachment styles, Machiavellianism was found to be positively associated with an avoidant attachment style,

which can either be a dismissive or fearful attachment style (Bloxsom et al., 2021). Inánsci et al. (2015) and Kabadzhova (2017) found the same: Machiavellianism is positively associated with a dismissing-avoidant attachment style.

However, research that focuses solely on the link between Machiavellianism and attachment has been neglected. Most studies on the Dark Triad and attachment usually focus a lot more on psychopathy and narcissism, instead of Machiavellianism, and often there is an overlap between Machiavellianism and psychopathy (e.g., Nickisch et al., 2020). Furthermore, the studies that have been done on Machiavellianism often only include insecure attachment styles, while leaving a secure attachment style out. This research has some practical relevance as well. Machiavellian personality traits (e.g., manipulativeness and immoral beliefs) are associated with immoral or criminal behavior. For example, research has shown that high Machiavellians are more likely to accept illegal opportunities for profit, commit fraud or use sexual coercion (Carré et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2020; Utami et al., 2019). By becoming more aware of how Machiavellianism and attachment associate with each other, we obtain a clear view on how attachment can result in high Machiavellian traits in adult life. This means that necessary steps can be taken to prevent this from happening. Therefore, this research will examine how each attachment style can be linked to Machiavellianism. Based on what is already known about attachment styles and the Dark Triad, four hypotheses were formulated.

1. Higher scores on Machiavellianism are linked to higher scores on the dismissive attachment style. This is expected because both Machiavellianism and dismissive attachment style are characterized by emotional detachment from others (Austin et al., 2007; Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006).
2. Higher scores on Machiavellianism are linked to lower scores on the preoccupied attachment style. Machiavellians have no craving for intimacy. Although they can

form bonds with others, those bonds are often exploited (Dussault et al., 2013). High Machiavellians are also independent and self-reliant (Bloxsom et al., 2021). In contrast, preoccupied individuals have a high need for intimacy, and fear abandonment (Nickisch et al., 2020).

3. Higher scores on Machiavellianism are linked to higher scores on the fearful attachment style. A fearful individual is usually defined as someone with low self-esteem and self-value (Balta et al., 2019). Research has shown that Machiavellianism is negatively correlated to self-esteem (McHoskey et al., 1999) and positively correlated to a grandiose sense of self-worth (Sutton & Keogh, 2001). A high Machiavellian thus shows signs that can be positively and negatively linked to a fearful attachment. However, because Bloxsom et al. (2021) found a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and avoidant attachment, a positive relationship is expected in this research.
4. Higher scores on Machiavellianism are linked to lower scores on the secure attachment style. A secure attachment results in prosocial behavior and healthy relationships (Jonason et al., 2014; Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2018). Because a Machiavellian shows deceptive behavior in relationships, it cannot be expected that they nurture healthy relationships (Dussault et al., 2013).

## Method

### Participants

Bachelor's and master's students from Tilburg University were asked to distribute a link of the questionnaires to friends and family as well as on social media. The final sample consisted of 227 participants, which consisted of 69 (30.4%) males. Their age ranged from 18 to 72 years ($M$ = 31.3, $SD$ = 14.77). All were given the same questionnaires. To make sure only people from the age of 18 or older participated, the survey ended when a person claimed

to be younger than 18. The School of Social and Behavioral Sciences Ethics Review Board of Tilburg University granted permission to execute the study. An a priori power analysis was performed using the GPower 3.1 application (Faul et al., 2007). This showed that the sample size should be at least 89 to have a power of .95 with an effect size of .15 and $\alpha = .05$, meaning that the used sample was sufficient.

**Measures**

***Five Factor Machiavellianism Inventory (FFMI)***

To measure Machiavellianism, the FFMI by Collison et al. (2018) was used and translated from English to Dutch. This questionnaire consists of 52 items, divided into 13 subscales, with four items per scale. The subscales are: achievement (*'I am not an ambitious person'*), activity (*'My friends would call me lazy'*), selfishness (*'I view others as tools to be used and manipulated'*), assertiveness (*'In meetings I typically let others do the talking'*), competence (*'People look at me to get the job done'*), deliberation (*'I like to carefully consider the consequences before I make a decision'*), invulnerable (*'I am not easily flustered'*), immodesty (*'I am better than others'*), order (*'I like having everything in its own, proper place'*), self-confidence (*'I am not easily embarrassed'*), manipulative (*'Being honest all the time won't lead to success'*), callousness (*'I don't worry about people's needs if they conflict with my own'*) and cynical (*'I have a great deal of faith in human nature* '). Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Disagree strongly" to 5 = "Agree strongly". The minimum score possible was 52, and the maximum score possible was 260. A higher total score indicated more Machiavellian behavior. Some items have been reverse-coded, which were items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 29, 32, 33, 35, 39, 41, 43, 44, 48 and 52. Cronbach's alpha had a value between .60 and .82 in the original research, which indicates that the test has a sufficient internal consistency (Collison et al., 2018). The internal

consistency was also calculated for this particular study. It was found that $\alpha = .494$, meaning that the internal consistency is poor (George & Mallary, 2019).

***Relationship Questionnaire (RQ)***

To measure attachment style the Dutch translation of the RQ by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) was used (Meesters & Muris, 2000). Usually, the RQ consists of a qualitative and quantitative measure, but for this study only the quantitative measure was used. The participants were presented with four relationship styles, and they had to score to which extent each attachment style suits their adult romantic life on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Not like me at all" to 7 = "Very much like me". For this questionnaire the item scores were used, meaning that the minimum score was 1 and the maximum score was 7. Higher scores indicated that an attachment style was more prominent in an individual. The four attachment styles measured by the questionnaire are: secure attachment, fearful attachment, dismissive attachment and preoccupied attachment. An example of one of the items is: '*I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.*' (i.e., fearful attachment). The internal consistency cannot be calculated for this study, because each item measures a different attachment style. However, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found a Cronbach's alpha between .74 and .88, which indicates that the test has a sufficient internal consistency (George & Mallary, 2019).

**Procedure**

Participants gave informed consent before participating in the study, with the option to withdraw from the study without explanation nor consequence at any given time. They also had the opportunity to take a break from taking the survey and completing it later. Anonymity was guaranteed. Data was collected via Qualtrics. The survey first consisted of

some demographical data, such as gender and age, before proceeding to the FFMI and RQ and took up to one hour maximum to complete. The questionnaires were given in random order. Participants were asked to only participate in the research once.

**Statistical analysis**

First, the number of missing values was calculated. Participants who had 10% or more missing items were excluded from the sample (Bennett, 2001). Thirty-eight participants were removed from the sample. Next, a Little's MCAR test was performed, which proved that the remaining missing values were random ($p$ = .287; $X^2$ = 61.445; $DF$ = 56). The remaining values were replaced with the mean from the corresponding scale. Furthermore, outliers were checked, using Mahalanobis, Cooks and Leverage analysis. Participants who were an outlier on 2 out of 3 values were excluded from the sample. This resulted in the exclusion of 38 participants, which means that 227 participants remained out of 303.

The hypotheses were tested with a multiple regression analysis with IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Results were deemed significant when $\alpha < .05$. Descriptive statistics were used to compute means and standard deviations. To perform a multiple regression, a few assumptions had to be checked. First, the assumption of normality was investigated. To do so, the skewness and kurtosis of both the total score of the FFMI and the item scores on the RQ were conducted (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Kurtosis and Skewness of the FFMI and RQ*

| | Kurtosis | Skewness |
|---|---|---|
| FFMI | -0.27 | 0.13 |
| RQ | -1.05 / 1.44[a] | -1.26 / 0.66[a] |

[a] Range.

It can be concluded that the assumption of normality has not been violated (Field, 2009). Next, the assumption of homoscedasticity and the assumption of linearity were investigated using a scatterplot, which proved that the assumptions were not violated. Furthermore, the assumption of independence has not been violated either, because all the questionnaires were filled out independently by the participants. Lastly, the possibility of multicollinearity was tested (Secure attachment style, VIF = 1,469; Fearful attachment style, VIF = 1,413; Dismissive attachment style, VIF = 1,154; Preoccupied attachment style, VIF = 1,207). Thus, multicollinearity was not a concern (Bakker, 2020-2021).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

First of all, the mean and standard deviation of the FFMI and every attachment style were calculated (Table 2). The most common attachment style was the secure attachment style ($M$ = 5.91, $SD$ = 1.19) and the least common was the preoccupied attachment style ($M$ = 2.44, $SD$ = 1.38). Not one participant chose option 7 = “very much like me” after reading the statement regarding the preoccupied attachment style.

**Table 2**

*Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of the FFMI and Attachment Styles*

| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total FFMI score | 156.53 | 10.58 | 132 | 187 |
| Secure attachment | 5.91 | 1.19 | 2 | 7 |
| Fearful attachment | 2,99 | 1.79 | 1 | 7 |
| Dismissive attachment | 3,66 | 1.77 | 1 | 7 |
| Preoccupied attachment | 2,44 | 1.38 | 1 | 6 |

Correlations were calculated, which can be found in Table 3. A significant correlation was found between each attachment style. The strongest correlation was found between the secure attachment style and fearful attachment style. The FFMI does not correlate with any of the attachment styles.

**Table 3**

*Correlations between FFMI, Fearful, Preoccupied, Dismissive and Secure Attachment*

| | Fearful attachment style | Preoccupied attachment style | Dismissive attachment style | Secure attachment style | FFMI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fearful attachment style | 1.00 | | | | |
| Preoccupied attachment style | .35** | 1.00 | | | |
| Dismissive attachment style | .29** | .16* | 1.00 | | |
| Secure attachment style | -.49** | -.36** | -.34** | 1.00 | |
| FFMI | .02 | -.04 | .06 | .06 | 1.00 |

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

**Explanatory Statistics**

Next, a multiple regression was conducted to test how different attachment styles can be linked to Machiavellianism scores. The four attachment styles together predicted only 1.4% of the variance ($R^2 = .014$, $F(4, 222) = 0.77$, $p = .546$). The results of the multiple regression can be found in Table 4. Hypothesis 1 expected a positive relationship between a dismissive attachment style and Machiavellianism. This effect was found, but not significant ($\beta = 0.083$, $t(222) = 1.17$, $p = .083$). Hypothesis 2 expected a negative relationship between a preoccupied attachment style and Machiavellianism. This negative effect was found, but not significant ($\beta = -0.032$, $t(222) = -0.44$, $p = -.032$). Hypothesis 3 expected a positive relationship between a fearful attachment style and Machiavellianism. Again, this positive effect was found, but not significant ($\beta = 0.056$, $t(222) = 0.70$, $p = .484$). Hypothesis 4 expected a negative relationship between a secure attachment style and Machiavellianism.

Surprisingly, a positive, but not significant, effect was found (β = 0.107, *t*(222) = 1.32, *p* = .188).

**Table 4**
*Result of the Multiple Regression*

| | B[a] | *SD*[a] | *β*[b] | *CI* [LL ; UL][c] | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 148.75 | 5.762 | | 137.39 ; 160.10 | 25.82 | <.001 |
| Secure attachment style | 0.946 | 0.717 | 0.107 | -.0467 ; 2.360 | 1.319 | .188 |
| Fearful attachment style | 0.328 | 0.469 | 0.056 | -0.595 ; 1.252 | 0.701 | .484 |
| Dismissive attachment style | 0.499 | 0.428 | 0.083 | -0.344 ; 1.341 | 1.166 | .245 |
| Preoccupied Attachment style | -0.247 | 0.562 | -0.032 | -1.354 ; 0.860 | -0.440 | .660 |

[a] Unstandardized coefficients. [b] Standardized coefficients. [c] CI = 95%-confidence interval, with the lower limit and upper limit respectively.

## Discussion

In the present study it was examined whether attachment style can be linked to Machiavellianism. To do so, four hypotheses were formulated. First of all, it was speculated that a dismissive attachment style could be associated with higher Machiavellianism scores. Although the effect goes in the expected positive direction, the multiple regression showed no significant effect, meaning that the hypothesis has been rejected. There is no link between Machiavellianism and a dismissive attachment style. This is in contrast with earlier findings

from Inánsci et al. (2015) and Kabadzhova (2017). They showed that Machiavellianism is in fact strongly linked to a dismissive attachment style.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that a preoccupied attachment could be associated with lower scores on Machiavellianism. Again, the general direction of the effect fits the hypothesis, but the effect was not significant. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected, and it cannot be concluded that a preoccupied attachment has any connection to Machiavellianism. Multiple studies have found the opposite effect of what was hypothesized: preoccupied attachment was found to be positively related to Machiavellianism (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Jonason et al., 2019; Nickisch et al., 2020).

The third hypothesis was that there is a positive connection between Machiavellianism and a fearful attachment style. The effect, again, went in the expected direction but was not significant. Therefore this hypothesis can be rejected, and it can be concluded that there is indeed no link between Machiavellianism and fearful attachment. This corresponds with the findings of Demircioğlu and Göncü (2018) and Inánsci et al. (2015), who also did not find a significant link. However, it does not match the finding of Bloxsom et al. (2021) who did find a significant, positive effect.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that high Machiavellianism is negatively associated with a secure attachment. However, no significant result was found in the data. In fact, the general direction of the effect is positive rather than negative. In conclusion, there is no link between Machiavellianism and secure attachment. This contradicts previous research by Jonason et al. (2014), who found that the lack of a secure attachment could possibly lead to high Machiavellian behavior. Furthermore, Inánsci et al. (2015) discovered that individuals with low Machiavellianism scores were more often securely attached than their high Machiavellian peers.

In conclusion, the present study shows that there is no link between attachment style

and Machiavellianism. This implies that attachment is irrelevant to the development of Machiavellianism, and should not be considered either a protective or risk factor for immoral behavior. Behaviors such as fraud and using sexual coercion cannot be prevented with attachment.

The results are not in line with previous research. It is often believed (and supported by research) that attachment during childhood can have a lasting impact on the formation of personality traits. For example, an insecure attachment may cultivate a lack of empathy for others, which suits a Machiavellian personality (Al Aïn et al., 2013; Britton & Fuendeling, 2005; Picardi et al., 2005). However, the lack of results can be explained by using other theories. The first explanation is given by Wastell and Booth (2003). They argued that Machiavellians live in what they call 'crowded isolation', meaning they do not form emotional connections, but are focused on themselves and their own needs. It is possible that the lack of connection means that no attachment style will be developed. Therefore, if Machiavellians do not form connections, this could mean that parenting and attachment are irrelevant to the development of an individual. Thus, someone with high Machiavellian traits will display those traits, regardless of secure or insecure attachment. However, no existing literature was found on this subject, meaning that it is only speculation. In addition, this explanation can only be applied when Machiavellianism is thought of as a congenital personality, instead of something that develops over time. When Machiavellianism is congenital, it is determined upon birth whether an individual will display Machiavellian traits or not. However, if Machiavellianism develops over time, this means that environmental factors ultimately decide if and when Machiavellian traits will develop. Both sides of this nature vs nurture debate are supported by research. For example, Veselka et al. (2011) found that Machiavellianism is caused by both genetic factors and non-shared environmental factors. This implies that parenting and attachment forming (i.e., environmental factors) have

a limited impact on the development of Machiavellianism, because it is partly caused by genetics.

Another possible explanation for the lack of results is given by Birkás et al. (2015). They found that the development of Machiavellianism as a result of caregiving is mediated by gender. They found that women are more sensitive to emotional warmth from both parents, thus, women are more likely to develop Machiavellian traits if there is a lack of emotional closeness to both parents. Women experience their parents as unsupportive, which deprives them of familial resources. Therefore, they develop a selfish and hostile attitude (i.e a Machiavellian attitude) in order to gain access to available resources. Men are more sensitive to paternal feedback, meaning that they are more likely to develop Machiavellian traits if they experience less paternal rejection or overprotection. It seems that men develop selfish, manipulative and delinquent attitudes when their father figures are less controlling. It can be concluded that not only the quality of caregiving is important, but also the gender of both the child and the parent. The sample of this research contained much more women (69.6%) than men (30.4%), which could have influenced the results. However, this research did measure attachment in general, rather than attachment to each parent, thus it cannot be said with certainty that this did influence the result. In future research, it could be interesting to use gender as a moderator.

This research is not without limitations. First, the FFMI did not have a sufficient Cronbach's alpha. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha for the RQ could not be calculated at all for this particular study. Therefore the internal validity of this research is questionable. Future research should take a critical look at the use of the FFMI and RQ. To measure attachment styles it is recommended to use another questionnaire. Four questions to measure attachment style is not enough, and a questionnaire with more items would probably perform better. Another limitation is that this study was done on the general population. To illustrate

this problem: the highest possible score on the FFMI is 260, but the highest score found in the sample was 187 ($M$ = 156.5). This is why we can only speak of high Machiavellian scores, rather than a Machiavellian personality. Therefore, it is recommended for further research to use a forensic sample instead of a non-clinical sample to obtain a better difference between high and low Machiavellianism, as this could possibly make a difference for the results. Lastly, the gender imbalance could have distorted the research as well. It is known that women usually score higher on anxiety while men usually score higher on avoidance within emotional relationships (Del Giudice, 2011). This can influence the type of attachment (either preoccupied/fearful or dismissive) that is most dominant in a person. Therefore, it is speculated that the high number of women in this research might have influenced the results. This research has some strengths as well. For a power of .95 the sample size should be at least 89. The current research had a sample size of 227, meaning that the desired power has been reached. Moreover, no assumptions for the multiple regression were violated.

To conclude, the aim of the current research was to establish the link between Machiavellianism and different attachment styles. The results came back insignificant, meaning that no connections were found between Machiavellianism and attachment. This is not in line with previous research. Some limitations have been discussed, such as the poor internal consistency of the FFMI and the low Machiavellian scores. For future research, it is recommended to repeat this research in a forensic population, with participants who have a higher Machiavellianism score.

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