

**Solving the paradox of Machiavellianism:
Machiavellianism may make for productive sales but poor team spirit.**

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Abstract:

Machiavellianism is an individual personality trait that has been closely examined in sales contexts. Results about the impact of this trait on sales performance are controversial. This study maintains that Machiavellianism negatively interacts with perspective taking in enforcing the collective self, which is found to be an important determinant of salespeople motivation. In order to test our hypotheses, a survey was conducted on salespeople in a pharmaceutical company. Managerial implications are discussed.

Solving the paradox of Machiavellianism: Machiavellianism may make for productive sales but poor team spirit.

Purpose of the research

Machiavellianism is a characteristic of individuals that has been closely examined in ethics research (e.g. Ricks and Fraedrich, 1999; Schepers, 2003). It is a personality trait defined as a propensity of an individual to detach from consideration of ethics and perform actions that profit the self. With regard to the sales context, previous research highlighted a paradox of Machiavellianism: while this trait is associated with a high productivity, high Machiavellian salespeople receive lower overall managerial ratings (Ricks and Fraedrich, 1999). One explanation of this paradox is the possibility that high Machiavellian salespeople are perceived by their supervisors as ineffective in other organizational tasks apart from the sales volume they generate. With regard to a possible area of Machiavellian ineffectiveness, this study maintains that Machiavellianism negatively interacts with perspective taking in enforcing the collective self, which is an important determinant of salespeople motivation.

Scholars consider perspective taking a trait of salespeople that can positively influence customer orientation (Widmier, 2002) and adaptive selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). In addition to affecting the ability of a salesperson to interact with customers, this trait may also play an important role *inside* the company by encouraging team spirit. Unfortunately, however, to the best of our knowledge no research to date has investigated this relationship.

This study investigates if the positive effect of this trait may be extended to the internal customers, namely coworkers that belong to the same functional group. The study hypothesizes a direct relationship between a salesperson's level of perspective taking and his/her level of collective self. Furthermore, we maintain that this latter construct is a driver of salespeople motivation. Finally, we posit that the efficacy of perspective taking in strengthening collective self is negatively moderated by Machiavellianism.

This paper is divided into the following sections: after a brief review of previous findings on the effectiveness of perspective taking and Machiavellianism in the sales context, we illustrate the research design adopted in the study for the hypotheses testing. Then we present the findings of the empirical study and in the final section we discuss the managerial implications of these results.

Perspective taking and sales

According to Eisenberg and Fabes (1990) empathy is “an emotional response that stems from another emotional state or condition, is congruent with the other's emotional state or condition, and involves at least a minimal degree of differentiation between self and other” (Eisenberg and Fabes, 1990, p.132).

Most scholars and practitioners consider empathy a fundamental element of effective selling (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones, 2007; Bagozzi, Belschak and Verbeke, 2010; Lockeman and Hallaq, 1982; Sharma, 2001; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Widmier, 2002), but some studies have yielded conflicting findings regarding the effectiveness of empathy in improving salesperson performance (McBane, 1995).

With regard to the conflicting findings about the relationship between this personal trait and salesperson performance, McBane (1995) suggested that different conceptualizations of empathy differentially affect salespeople performance. Perspective taking is one of the different components of this complex construct (e.g. Bagozzi, Belschak and Verbeke, 2010; McBane, 1995) and scholars analyzed its specific role in determining salespeople effectiveness (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Widmier, 2002). Perspective taking is defined as the ability to understand and predict another's thoughts, feelings and actions and, in the sales context, salespeople high in perspective-taking are better in understanding and meeting the special needs of customers (Widmier, 2002). Namely, scholars demonstrated that perspective taking is an important determinant of adaptive selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990) and customer orientation (Widmier, 2002). Our study aims to extend this second result to the "internal client" that may be represented by groups of coworkers. In fact, the "ability to understand and predict another's thoughts" may also be referred to the members of the work organization that belong to the same team. Despite the potential role of perspective taking in encouraging greater *internal* customer orientation, to the best of our knowledge no research has investigated this relationship. With regard to customer orientation salespeople are motivated by the welfare of clients, whereas the internal customer orientation implies that the group of coworkers' welfare gives rise to self-worth. This orientation can be measured by the collective self. The collective self, as defined by Russell et al. (2006, p.177) is a self-definition based on one's social group memberships, where individuals are motivated by the welfare of the groups to which they belong. Thus we hypothesize that:

Hp 1: There is a positive relationship between a salesperson's level of perspective taking and his/her level of collective self.

Russell et al. (2006) found that collective self predicts outcomes such as satisfaction with one's company and commitment. In keeping with this finding, our study extends it to the sales context by considering motivation as a relevant potential outcome of collective self. In our study motivation is measured by desire to act. Bagozzi (1992; 2006) defines desires as psychological states that are necessary to convert reasons for actions into intention to act. Such desires might be termed behavioral desires because they refer to the desires to act. Bagozzi proposed that desires provide the motivational impetus for intentions to act. A growing body of research has confirmed this transformative roles of desires (e.g. Perugini and Bagozzi, 2001; Bagozzi, Dholakia and Basuroy, 2003; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) but no research in the sales context demonstrated that collective self is an antecedent of desire to act. Thus:

Hp2: There is a positive relationship between a salesperson's level collective self and his/her desire to act.

Sales and paradox of Machiavellianism

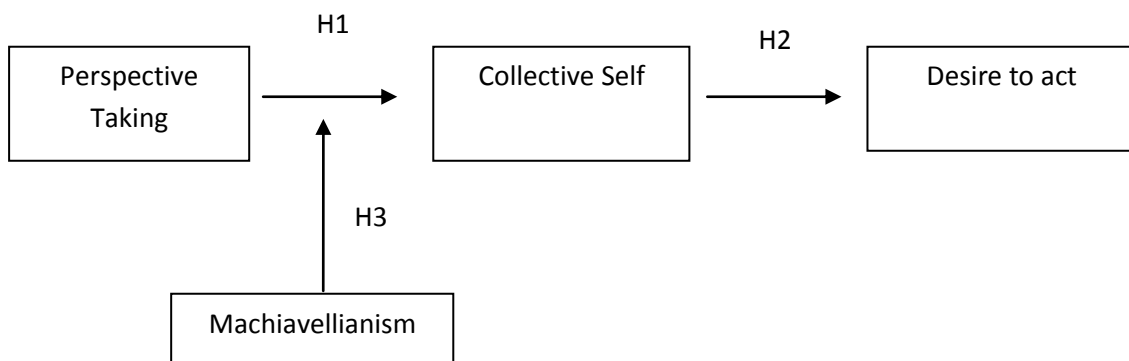
Wisn, Near and Miller (1996; p.285) defined Machiavellianism as “a strategy of social conduct that involves manipulating others for personal gain, often against other’s self-interest”. Machiavellian people use other persons as an instrument to achieve their goals (Paal and Barezkey, 2007). Machiavellianism is considered a personal trait and it is a quantitative trait in the sense that everyone is capable of manipulative behavior to some degree, but some are more “talented” than others (Wisn, Near and Miller, 1996).

But are Machiavellian people attractive for companies? The debate about this point is still inconclusive. If we consider the typical measures of success in social environments, there is no clear evidence that high-Machs outperform low-Machs. For example, research suggests that there is no correlation between Machiavellianism and success in marketing jobs (Hunt and Chonko, 1984) and, with specific regard to sales, research arrived to conflicting conclusions: Turnbull (1976) demonstrated that high-Machs salespeople are not more successful than low-Mach salespeople whereas Ricks and Fraedrick (1999)’s findings suggest that those who possess high Machiavellian trait are more productive. Nevertheless, according to Ricks and Fraedrick (1999) Machiavellianism is a paradox because, despite their success, high-Machs salespeople receive lower overall managerial ratings. These contrasting results suggest that while Machiavellianism has a direct and positive impact on sales, on the other hand it may negatively interfere with perspective taking, that has been found to be positively related to sales performance. With this regard, a recent study by Bagozzi, Verbeke and Dietvorst (in press) that investigates the neuro correlates of theory of mind and empathetic processes, demonstrates that Machiavellianism is negatively related to perspective-taking. Thus, in line with this finding we hypothesize that:

H3: Machiavellianism moderates the relationship between perspective taking and collective self in such a way that the relationship is weaker for high mach salespeople.

The hypotheses are graphically represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The hypotheses



Method

Data were collected from salespeople representing a pharmaceutical company. They were assigned geographical areas and were responsible for building and maintaining relationship with doctors.

During a sales meeting, we gave salespeople a questionnaire, and pre-stamped envelopes in order to give them the possibility to send us back the forms and to guarantee their anonymity. We gave them a deadline for the return of the questionnaires: we stopped the collection 20 days after the target presentation. The questionnaires included measures for desires to perform the needed actions to obtain the goal, perspective taking, collective self and Machiavellianism.

The entire sales force, totaling 316 salespeople, took part to the research: 159 of them returned the questionnaire. Five of them were uncompleted. We obtained 154 usable questionnaires.

Measures

Desire to act. Following Perugini and Bagozzi (2001), we measured this variable with 3 items: “my desire to perform actions to achieve the goal can be best expressed as (not desire at all/very strong)” ; “I desire to perform actions to achieve my goal (strongly disagree/ strongly agree)”; I feel an urge to perform actions I listed in question 2 to achieve my goal x (does not describe me at all/ describe me very well)”. The responses format consisted in a 10 points scale. Coefficient alpha for the indicator was .88.

Collective self. Following Russell et al. (2006), collective self was measured by 5 items: “Making a lasting contribution to groups that I belong, such as my work organization, is very important to me”; “When I become involved in a group, I do my best to ensure its success”; “I feel great pride when my team or group does well, even if I’m not the main reason for its success”; “I would be honored if I were chosen by an organization or club I belong to, to represent them at a conference or meeting”; “When I’m part of a team, I’m concerned about the group as a whole instead of whether individual team members like me or whether I like them”. These 7 point scales were anchored by “1=strongly disagree” and “7= strongly agree”. Coefficient alpha for the indicator was .73.

Perspective Taking. Bagozzi et al. (2010) verified that empathy is one of a set of seven dimensions of basic skills that regulate salespeople emotions and they considered perspective taking as a component of empathy. In keeping with their operationalization of perspective taking, we measured this variables with a single item: “I can easily put myself in the place of my customers and colleagues and their needs (1=strongly disagree/7= strongly agree)”.

Machiavellianism. Consistent with most studies in marketing ethics, Machiavellianism was measured using the shorter version (10 items) of Mach IV scale developed by Christie and Geis (1970). Sample items include "The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear (1=strongly disagree/7=strongly agree)" and "When you ask someone to do something for you, it is best to give the real reason for wanting it rather than giving reasons that might give more weight(1=strongly disagree/7= strongly agree)". Coefficient alpha for the indicator was .59. Because of this unsatisfactory result about the internal validity of the Machiavellian scale, we conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis on the same scale in order to exclude the items that compromised internal validity. For all the items, factors loadings were high (range = from .39 to .77) and significant with the exception of four items ("When you ask someone to do something for you, it is best to give the real reason for wanting it rather than giving reasons that might give more weight"; "One should take action only when it is morally right"; "Most people are basically good and kind"; "There is no excuse for lying to someone else") with a t-value less than 1.96. Then we performed a second Confirmatory Factor Analysis where these four non-significant items were dropped out: The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was equal to 0.07, confirming an excellent fit (Bollen, 1989). Furthermore, the values of the most stable comparative fit index measures are satisfactory (Bollen, 1989): NFI=0.92, CFI=0.92, and GFI=0.96. Thus, we excluded the four non significant items from the following analysis.

Results

To test the causal relation between perspective taking and collective self regression analysis was performed. The analysis shows that perspective taking does not predict collective self ($\beta=-.06$, $p=n.s$). Thus H1 was not supported by data.

Then, to analyze the relationships between collective self and desire to act (second hypothesis), a regression analysis was run. The findings support the hypothesis: collective self significantly affects desire to act, as hypothesized ($\beta=-.41$, $p<.001$).

In order to verify the role of Machiavellianism as moderator of the relationship between perspective taking and desire to act (H3), we analyzed the data using moderated regressions models. The dependent variable is collective self. The independent variables are perspective taking, Machiavellianism and the interactions between them.

To improve the interpretability of the main effects in the presence of interaction variables, we mean centered the independent and the dependent variables before computing the interaction ones (see Jaccard, Turrisi, and Choi, 1990). To estimate the unconditional main effects, first we examined the models lower in the hierarchy that do not include the interaction terms under consideration. Then, we included in the model the two-way interaction between perspective taking and Machiavellianism. The joint effect of these two latter variables was negative and significant (see Table

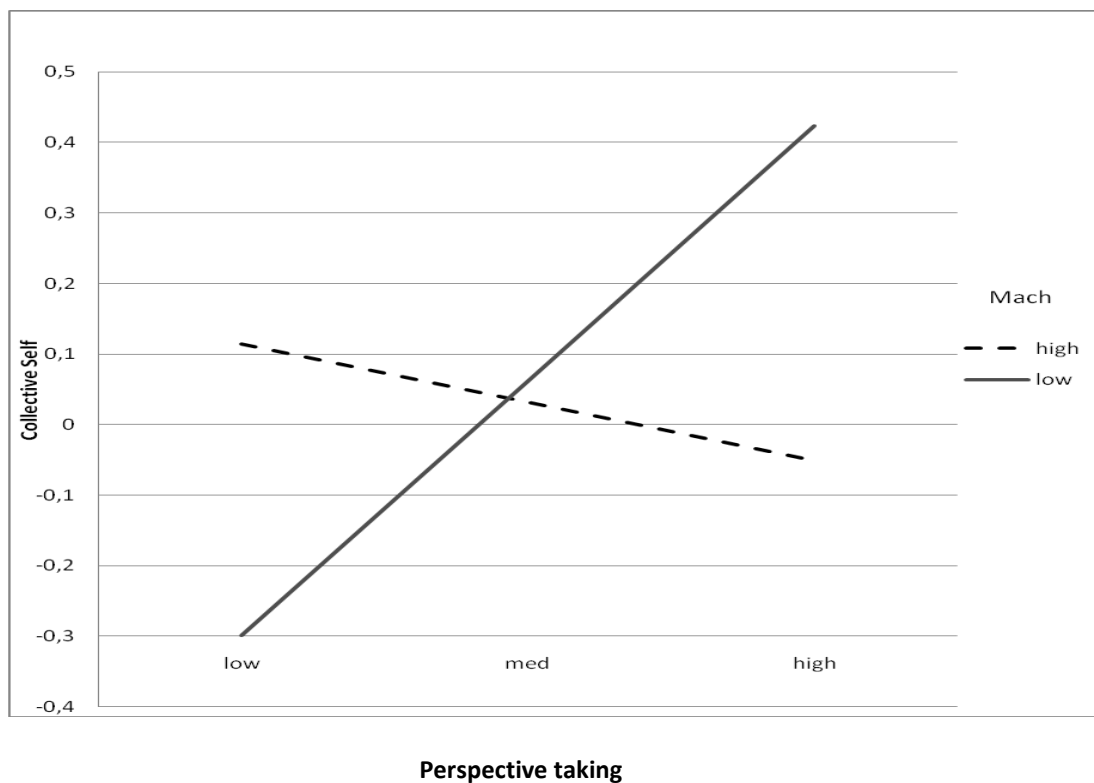
1): as predicted, Machiavellianism coupled with perspective taking decreases salespeople's collective self. This interaction is depicted in Figure 2.

TABLE 1 : Results of regression model for collective self.

	Main effects only	Main Effects + two-Way Interaction
Independent variable		
Perspective Taking β	n.s.	n.s.
Machiavellianism β	n.s.	n.s.
Perspective Taking X Machiavellianism β		-.20*
Significance of <i>F</i>	n.s.	.09
R^2	.00	.04

.Figure 2. Effects of perspective taking on collective self for different levels of

Mach



Conclusions

This research sheds some light on the paradox of Machiavellianism underlined by Ricks and Fraedrick (1999). This study highlights the role of Machiavellianism as a negative moderator on the effect of perspective taking on collective self. Our findings match with neurological studies (Bagozzi et al, *in press*) which state that Machiavellians lack fundamental mind reading skills that are important for social and emotional intelligence. Furthermore our research proves that team spirit, measured by collective self, is an important determinant of salespeople motivation.

Our study inevitably has some limitations. First, we used self-declared measures. Second, our findings are based on the examination of a single company and therefore might not be generalized. Third, a number of situational variables (such as the importance of team spirit in motivating salespeople) may be added in future studies.

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