

# Understanding Machiavellianism: Traits, Psychological Perspectives, and Implications for Psychotherapy

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### Introduction

Niccolò Machiavelli, a renowned 16th-century Italian philosopher, diplomat, and author, remains one of history's most polarizing figures. His seminal work *"The Prince"* has been both lauded and criticized for its pragmatic, even ruthless, approach to power and governance. It is within this treatise that the seeds of "Machiavellianism" were sown—a term now synonymous with manipulative and self-serving strategies in interpersonal and societal contexts. Over centuries, the term has transcended its political origins to become a psychological concept, embodying a personality trait characterized by cynicism, manipulation, and emotional detachment. While Machiavelli himself likely never intended for his name to become a shorthand for moral flexibility and cunning, his legacy has provided a fertile ground for academic inquiry, especially in the domain of psychology. This research paper explores the psychological underpinnings of Machiavellianism, with a specific focus on its implications for psychotherapy, a field where such traits present unique challenges and opportunities for both practitioners and clients.

Machiavellianism, as a psychological construct, encompasses a complex interplay of behaviors and attitudes. At its core, individuals high in Machiavellian traits exhibit a cynical worldview, believing that people are inherently selfish and driven by personal gain. This cynicism often manifests in manipulative behaviors—calculated efforts to influence and control others through deceit, flattery, or exploitation. Emotional detachment is another hallmark of Machiavellianism, as such individuals frequently lack empathy and concern for the well-being of others, viewing relationships as transactional rather than meaningful. Furthermore, these traits are often accompanied by a relentless focus on power and control, as well as a strategic, pragmatic approach to achieving goals, even if it comes at the expense of ethical considerations or the well-being of others. Understanding these traits within a psychological framework is crucial, not just for academic purposes but also for their application in real-world contexts such as leadership, interpersonal dynamics, and, most pertinently, psychotherapy.

The relevance of studying Machiavellianism in a therapeutic context cannot be overstated. Individuals exhibiting high levels of Machiavellian traits often pose unique challenges in clinical settings. Their manipulative tendencies and emotional detachment

can hinder the development of a genuine therapeutic alliance, a foundational component of effective therapy. Moreover, these individuals may exploit the therapeutic relationship itself, using it as a means to further their own agendas rather than as an opportunity for personal growth. On the other hand, therapists must also be cautious not to pathologize these traits unnecessarily but instead seek to understand their origins and manifestations. Research has shown that environmental factors, such as childhood maltreatment and dysfunctional family dynamics, often play a significant role in the development of Machiavellian traits. By delving into these influences and their psychological ramifications, therapists can better navigate the complexities of treating such individuals, fostering both ethical and effective therapeutic practices.

This research paper aims to address a central question: How do the core traits of Machiavellianism, as defined by psychological research, influence the therapeutic process and outcomes for individuals undergoing psychotherapy, and what strategies can therapists employ to effectively address these traits in clinical practice? To answer this question, the paper synthesizes existing literature and utilizes a multi-faceted methodological approach. Central to the analysis are critical evaluations of previous research, comparative analyses of therapeutic outcomes in individuals with varying degrees of Machiavellian traits, and an exploration of theoretical frameworks such as the Dark Triad—a cluster of personality traits encompassing Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. By integrating these methodologies, the paper seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities Machiavellianism presents in psychotherapy, as well as potential strategies for addressing these challenges.

The structure of this paper is designed to provide a systematic and thorough exploration of the topic. Chapter 2 begins by defining Machiavellianism and its core characteristics, situating it within the broader framework of the Dark Triad traits. Chapter 3 delves into the psychological mechanisms underlying Machiavellian behaviors, examining emotional processing, cognitive patterns, and behavioral manifestations. Chapter 4 shifts focus to the therapeutic implications of Machiavellianism, analyzing the challenges it presents in clinical settings and exploring evidence-based treatment approaches. Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings to discuss clinical outcomes and offers recommendations for future research

and therapeutic practices. By following this logical progression, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Machiavellianism, from its theoretical foundations to its practical implications in psychotherapy.

### Understanding Machiavellianism

Delving into the intricate nature of Machiavellianism reveals a rich tapestry of psychological traits that underscore profound manipulative behaviors and emotional detachment. The discussion will explore the defining characteristics and underlying motivations of Machiavellian individuals, including their strategic thinking and cynical worldviews. Additionally, an examination of the connections to other Dark Triad traits will illuminate the complexity of these personalities, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of their societal implications and influencing factors. This exploration forms a crucial foundation for examining psychological mechanisms and therapeutic approaches in subsequent sections.

### Definition and Core Characteristics

Machiavellianism is a psychological construct defined by its focus on manipulative behaviors, strategic thinking, and a deeply cynical worldview. This construct is rooted in the perception that human interaction is fundamentally self-serving, with individuals believing that others act primarily out of selfish motivations [1,2]. This perspective not only shapes their interactions in interpersonal and societal contexts but also justifies manipulative tactics aimed at personal gain. What sets Machiavellianism apart from other personality constructs, such as psychopathy, is the prioritization of calculated, long-term planning over impulsivity [1]. The belief that the social world is inherently deceitful and hostile further drives behaviors that exploit social structures for personal advantage, reinforcing the construct's emphasis on achieving goals through pragmatic and strategic manipulation [2].

One of the distinguishing features of Machiavellianism is the intrinsic cynicism that underpins its core traits. Cynicism, as a defining characteristic, shapes an individual's worldview by fostering the assumption that people act purely out of self-interest. This belief influences other behaviors, such as manipulation, as it normalizes deceptive actions in the pursuit of personal objectives [3]. Individuals with high Machiavellian traits operate from the assumption that relationships are transactional and that trust is a liability rather than an asset [3]. This outlook places them at odds with social norms that prioritize cooperation, creating unique challenges in interpersonal and organizational settings. Although this skepticism may have some contextual utility, such as in leadership roles requiring negotiation skills, it often manifests as a barrier to forming meaningful and ethical relationships [3].

Emotional detachment is another critical component of Machiavellianism, marked by a lack of empathy and disregard for the emotional well-being of others. This detachment enables Machiavellian individuals to prioritize their own goals without the interference of guilt or moral conflict, further emphasizing a pragmatic approach to human interaction [2]. Emotional detachment provides a buffer that allows exploitation to occur without the emotional toll typically associated with harming others. For instance, the capacity to maintain an unemotional stance enables these individuals to manipulate relationships while remaining unaffected by ethical dilemmas, underscoring their self-serving priorities [4]. This emotional disconnection not only facilitates exploitative behaviors but also contributes to their inability to form genuine connections, as relationships are often viewed as tools for achieving their objectives [2]. The

prevalence of these traits poses significant societal challenges, as their interactions often disregard collective welfare in favor of individual advancement.

Cynicism, as a core trait, also impacts attachment styles in interpersonal relationships. High-Machiavellian individuals exhibit a dismissive-avoidant attachment style, characterized by minimal trust and emotional intimacy, which aligns with their cynical perspective on human nature [4]. This lack of trust often leads Machiavellians to exploit relationships for strategic purposes, seeking closeness only when it serves their goals while maintaining emotional distance to protect themselves from vulnerability [4]. This paradoxical behavior, where closeness is sought for instrumental gains but emotional attachment is avoided, highlights the complexity of their social dynamics. Emotional intimacy is inherently devalued in their interactions, leading to difficulties in establishing meaningful personal connections [4]. Furthermore, their negative perceptions of others reinforce their cynical worldview, with altruistic actions from others often interpreted as veiled manipulation [4]. This dynamic reflects an inner conflict where the desire for control coexists with a calculated approach to interpersonal engagement, further complicating their relational strategies [4].

Manipulative tendencies are another hallmark of Machiavellianism and are often tied to their strategic thinking. Individuals with high Machiavellian traits excel in adapting their behaviors to align with their goals, utilizing flexibility and pragmatism to navigate various social contexts. For example, when the situation demands, they can employ compromise tactics to enhance their reputation or achieve their objectives, highlighting their capacity for strategic adaptability [3]. This ability to modify their manipulative strategies based on situational demands underscores their calculated and opportunistic mindset, as they persistently seek to maximize personal gain while minimizing risks [3]. Public demonstrations of altruism, though seemingly benevolent, are often a deceptive method employed by Machiavellians to improve their social standing, revealing the complexity of their outward behaviors [3]. Such adaptability ensures that their approach remains consistently goal-oriented, with actions carefully calibrated to serve their long-term objectives [3]. While these strategies prove effective in advancing individual agendas, they pose ethical dilemmas and reveal a lack of sincerity in interpersonal and organizational contexts.

Machiavellianism shares certain overlapping features with the other two Dark Triad traits—narcissism and psychopathy—but retains distinct characteristics. For instance, while narcissism is driven by a desire for admiration and psychopathy by impulsive and reckless behaviors, Machiavellianism is rooted in calculated, strategic manipulation [5]. Its alignment with goal-oriented pragmatism rather than emotional grandiosity or reckless decision-making differentiates it from its Dark Triad counterparts. Overlap is evident in traits such as manipulateness and lack of empathy; however, Machiavellianism's focus on achieving objectives through deliberate planning offers a unique lens through which its behaviors can be understood [3]. The absence of impulsivity, which is a defining trait of psychopathy, underscores the deliberate and methodical nature of Machiavellians, who prioritize calculated risks over immediate gratification [3]. Unlike narcissists, who seek validation from others, Machiavellians view interpersonal interactions as tools to achieve their ends, emphasizing their pragmatic orientation [5]. These distinctions reinforce the nuanced nature of Machiavellianism, which, while interconnected with the broader Dark Triad, exhibits unique patterns of thought and behavior [3].

A notable psychological component of Machiavellianism is the emotional-cognitive divide. High-Machiavellian individuals typically exhibit diminished affective empathy, which hinders emotional connection with others, while maintaining or even enhancing cognitive empathy, which allows them to understand and predict emotional responses effectively. This duality enables them to exploit social relationships for personal gain while remaining emotionally unencumbered [1,2]. The lack of affective empathy manifests as an inability to process or experience the emotional consequences of their actions, allowing for manipulative behaviors devoid of guilt or remorse [2]. Conversely, their cognitive empathy facilitates strategic manipulation by providing insight into others' emotional states, which can be leveraged to influence or exploit them [1]. Alexithymia, or the difficulty in recognizing and expressing emotions, compounds their emotional detachment, fostering a pragmatic and calculated approach to relationships [2]. This emotional-cognitive dichotomy underscores the psychological complexity of Machiavellianism, as the interplay between emotional deficits and strategic cognitive capabilities facilitates the pursuit of self-serving goals [1].

Through these characteristics, Machiavellianism emerges as a complex and multifaceted construct, interweaving emotional detachment, strategic thinking, and manipulative tendencies. These traits, while serving self-interest, present significant challenges in interpersonal and societal contexts, raising important questions about their ethical and social implications. As the next chapter explores its connectivity with other Dark Triad traits, the nuanced relationship between these constructs will further illuminate the nature of Machiavellianism.

### **Connection to Dark Triad Traits**

Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, commonly grouped as the Dark Triad traits, exhibit both shared and distinct characteristics. Among them, Machiavellianism is distinguished by its calculated and pragmatic orientation, a quality that emphasizes strategic manipulation over the impulsivity associated with psychopathy or the grandiosity typical of narcissism [5,6]. Unlike psychopathy, which often manifests in reckless or short-term decision-making, Machiavellian individuals demonstrate deliberate and long-term planning [6]. This calculated manipulation is characterized by meticulous analysis of social scenarios to maximize advantage while minimizing risks [7]. Furthermore, narcissists, though manipulative, are driven by a need for admiration and validation rather than a singular focus on achieving pragmatic goals. This distinction is supported by findings that narcissism positively correlates with extraversion, enhancing their social engagement, whereas Machiavellianism does not [5,8]. The contrast between Machiavellians' strategic pragmatism and the impulsivity or attention-seeking behaviors of psychopathy and narcissism highlights the uniqueness of their approach to manipulation.

The temporal orientation of Machiavellianism is a particularly distinguishing factor, as individuals with high levels of this trait focus on long-term strategies and delayed gratification. This characteristic is in sharp contrast to the impulsive, short-term actions typical of psychopathy [6]. Machiavellian individuals exhibit restraint and rationality, enabling them to achieve consistent and goal-oriented outcomes without succumbing to immediate temptations or risks. Their capacity for delayed gratification not only differentiates them from psychopaths but also reflects their ability to adapt behavior to fit social contexts, as evidenced in their propensity for calculated decisions and

sustained focus on long-term objectives [5,7]. In the interpersonal circumplex model, Machiavellians' behavior is positioned as calculated control, contrasting starkly with the reckless dominance exhibited by psychopaths [6]. This temporal focus also reveals ethical implications, as Machiavellian individuals may employ their manipulation discreetly, causing long-term harm that might not be immediately evident [6]. The capacity for future-oriented planning makes Machiavellians particularly effective in hierarchical environments that reward strategic behaviors, adding to their societal and professional impact.

Despite these distinctions, significant overlaps among the Dark Triad traits exist, which researchers often attribute to underlying shared characteristics such as low agreeableness and reduced honesty-humility [5,9]. These overlapping features include manipulative tendencies and a marked lack of empathy, though the mechanisms underpinning these behaviors can vary. For instance, while both Machiavellians and psychopaths exhibit low emotional empathy, Machiavellians possess heightened cognitive empathy, enabling them to understand and exploit others' emotional responses effectively [2,8]. This sophisticated use of cognitive empathy enhances their manipulative efficacy compared to the more impulsive or emotionally reactive behaviors exhibited by psychopaths or narcissists [2]. Similarly, though narcissists and Machiavellians both engage in manipulation, the former often seeks attention and social status, while the latter focuses solely on pragmatic goals, regardless of recognition or social standing [9]. These nuanced differences underscore the complexity within this cluster of maladaptive traits and highlight the necessity of examining their distinct mechanisms.

Cultural and societal influences also play a crucial role in shaping both the commonalities and distinctions among the Dark Triad traits. Societies with hierarchical structures often foster higher levels of Machiavellian traits, given the competitive advantage they provide in environments prioritizing power and control [5]. In such contexts, strategic manipulation becomes an adaptive response to societal pressures, as individuals navigate complex social dynamics to achieve their objectives [9]. Integrated societies that emphasize collective goals similarly encourage manipulative behaviors, as the ability to influence and coordinate with others aligns with the social rewards of such tactics [9]. Additionally, cultural norms influence the acceptability and expression of these traits, with individualistic cultures often tolerating or rewarding manipulative behaviors, while collectivist cultures may restrict them [5]. Emotional detachment, a defining feature of Machiavellianism, further enhances the trait's adaptability, as it facilitates goal attainment in competitive environments by minimizing ethical and emotional interference [2]. Cross-cultural studies suggest that the interaction between societal norms and individual predispositions is key to understanding the diverse manifestations of Machiavellianism and its relationship to other Dark Triad traits.

Another notable factor in distinguishing the relationships among these traits is gender. Research consistently demonstrates that men score higher than women on Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy [5,8]. The prominence of these traits in men may reflect their evolutionary role as adaptive strategies in highly competitive environments, where traits like strategic manipulation and dominance historically provided advantages [10]. Machiavellianism, in particular, is associated with strategic social dominance, which likely offered evolutionary benefits in hierarchical societies [10]. By contrast, women tend

to exhibit manipulative behaviors that focus more heavily on relational aggression and social cohesion, aligning with different evolutionary pressures [11]. Furthermore, gender differences vary across cultures, with more pronounced disparities observed in Western, developed societies characterized by individualistic and competitive norms [5,8]. This variability underscores the complex interplay between biological predispositions and cultural influences in shaping the expression of Dark Triad traits.

The shared evolutionary roots of these traits also provide insight into their adaptive functions. While Machiavellianism represents a pragmatic approach with long-term implications, psychopathy and narcissism reflect more impulsive or self-grandiose strategies [10]. Research in evolutionary psychology suggests that these traits may have developed as responses to specific social and reproductive pressures, with each trait offering distinct advantages in competitive settings. For instance, Machiavellians' ability to manipulate and deceive may have conferred reproductive advantages in environments where social competition was particularly intense [10]. The tendency of narcissists to seek social status through grandiosity or of psychopaths to dominate impulsively also aligns with evolutionary models emphasizing diverse strategies for survival and reproduction [10]. These varied mechanisms underscore the complementary yet distinct roles of the Dark Triad traits in adaptive social dynamics.

The nuanced distinctions and overlaps of the Dark Triad traits are also evident in their cognitive and emotional orientations. Machiavellians' reliance on cognitive empathy, in contrast to psychopaths' impulsive emotional processing or narcissists' reactivity, highlights their unique capacity for calculated control [2,8]. The pragmatic and deliberate approach of Machiavellianism emphasizes long-term planning over the immediate gratification seen in psychopathy [6]. This future-focused perspective underpins their manipulative strategies and allows them to adapt effectively to different social and professional environments [5]. Moreover, research has linked the Dark Triad traits to prejudiced attitudes and social dominance orientation, underscoring their implications for intergroup dynamics. For example, Machiavellians' calculated manipulation aligns with latent prejudices that uphold hierarchical structures, whereas the impulsive tendencies of psychopathy often result in overt expressions of prejudice [12]. These findings contribute to understanding how the cognitive and emotional characteristics of these traits influence broader societal outcomes.

Concluding this discussion, while Machiavellianism shares significant overlaps with the other Dark Triad traits, its distinct focus on calculated and pragmatic manipulation sets it apart. By integrating cultural, gender, and evolutionary perspectives, this examination underscores the interplay of biological predispositions and societal influences in shaping these traits. As subsequent chapters explore their psychological mechanisms, the distinct and shared features of the Dark Triad will continue to unfold.

### **Psychological Mechanisms**

Exploring the intricate psychological mechanisms behind Machiavellianism reveals a complex interplay of emotional processing, cognitive patterns, and behavioral manifestations. The subsequent sections will elucidate how emotional detachment and distorted cognitive perspectives facilitate manipulative behaviors, while also examining the detrimental effects on interpersonal relationships. By understanding these underlying mechanisms, the work aims to shed light on the broader implications of Machiavellian traits within both individual and societal contexts, paving the way for more effective therapeutic approaches and interventions.

### **Emotional Processing and Empathy**

Emotional processing and empathy are central to understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying Machiavellianism. A distinctive feature of individuals with high levels of Machiavellian traits is their pronounced divergence between cognitive and affective empathy. Research has demonstrated that while affective empathy, or the capacity to emotionally resonate with others, is significantly reduced in Machiavellians, cognitive empathy, which involves understanding and predicting others' emotional states, is often maintained or even heightened [13,14]. This dichotomy allows such individuals to exploit social relationships effectively, as their cognitive empathy equips them with the tools to manipulate others without the emotional burden of guilt or remorse. The absence of affective empathy undermines their ability to form meaningful interpersonal connections, as emotional detachment predominates their relational strategies. This emotional disparity facilitates a calculated and utilitarian approach to interactions, underscoring the manipulative tendencies characteristic of Machiavellianism [13]. By leveraging cognitive empathy as a strategic tool, Machiavellians are able to achieve self-serving goals, often at the expense of genuine emotional engagement. These findings suggest that fostering emotional balance through therapeutic interventions could mitigate such manipulative behaviors.

Alexithymia, defined as difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, further exacerbates the emotional deficits observed in individuals with high Machiavellian traits. This condition fosters a disconnection from their own emotional experiences, thereby restricting their emotional connectivity with others [15]. High Machiavellians often exhibit externally oriented thinking, focusing on pragmatic and observable aspects of interactions while neglecting emotional nuances [15]. This cognitive style reinforces their instrumental view of relationships, treating others as means to an end rather than as relational partners. Emotional detachment, compounded by alexithymia, facilitates cold and calculated decision-making processes, enabling Machiavellians to manipulate others without experiencing guilt or ethical conflict [13]. Furthermore, alexithymia aligns with their cynical worldview, as their inability to process emotional nuances reinforces their perception of human interactions as transactional and self-serving [15]. Addressing alexithymia through emotional literacy and self-awareness training could foster healthier interpersonal connections by diminishing the detached and manipulative tendencies that characterize Machiavellian social strategies.

The bypassing of affective empathy through cognitive processes such as theory of mind (ToM) is another key feature of Machiavellianism. While ToM enables individuals to discern the intentional states of others, it is used by Machiavellians not for collaborative purposes but for manipulative ends [1,14]. This cognitive mechanism allows them to exploit others' emotional vulnerabilities while maintaining a detached interpersonal style. Research highlights that their skill in mapping others' emotional states is often deployed strategically to create power imbalances or to restrict others' awareness of relevant facts [14]. In this way, Machiavellians amplify emotional cues to influence behavior while withholding genuine emotional engagement, further underscoring their self-serving priorities [1]. This detached and instrumental use of ToM reinforces their distrustful worldview, wherein manipulation is perceived as a rational response to a hostile social environment [14]. Therapeutic approaches could focus on fostering genuine emotional understanding rather than exploitative manipulation by encouraging cooperative relational goals.

The cognitive-emotional dissonance observed in Machiavellians further illustrates their ability to compartmentalize emotions. By recognizing emotional cues cognitively while failing to experience or respond to them emotionally, they are able to engage in manipulative behaviors without confronting the ethical or emotional consequences of their actions [1]. This dynamic is particularly evident in their use of deception to establish and maintain power imbalances in relationships. By feigning emotional responses to gain trust while withholding genuine emotional engagement, Machiavellians create a distorted interpersonal dynamic that prioritizes calculated exchanges over relational depth [14]. The resulting erosion of trust fosters adversarial relational patterns, where others may become trapped in cycles of manipulation and exploitation [1]. Interventions aimed at bridging the gap between cognitive and affective empathy could help reduce this emotional detachment, promoting more ethical and meaningful social interactions.

In adolescents, empathy deficiencies linked to Machiavellianism manifest in externalizing behaviors, including delinquency and rule-breaking. Research has shown that low levels of cognitive empathy in these individuals complicate their ability to form secure social attachments, increasing the risk of behavioral issues [16]. Adolescents high in Machiavellian traits prioritize self-interest and disregard the emotional implications of their actions on others, reflecting a lack of emotional connection in their interactions [16]. Role-taking training has been proposed as an effective intervention to address these deficiencies by encouraging adolescents to adopt the perspectives of others, fostering emotional engagement and reducing externalizing behaviors [16]. By incorporating elements of emotional regulation and problem-solving skills, such interventions could mitigate manipulative tendencies and support healthier social development. Early identification and intervention are crucial in preventing the reinforcement of Machiavellian behaviors, promoting emotional and cognitive growth during critical developmental stages.

Research further highlights that empathy deficits contributing to Machiavellianism are evident even in childhood. For instance, children with low affective-perspective-taking abilities are more likely to exhibit manipulative behaviors, indicating that empathy deficiencies play a foundational role in the development of Machiavellian traits [17]. Such children often fail to recognize the emotional implications of their actions, reinforcing a manipulative and self-serving approach to peer interactions. Targeted interventions like perspective-taking exercises could reduce the prevalence of these behaviors by encouraging emotional understanding and fostering empathetic engagement [17]. Teachers and caregivers also play a pivotal role in modeling compassionate behavior and reinforcing positive emotional dynamics, guiding children toward healthier relational patterns [17]. Early efforts to address empathy deficits could significantly influence long-term personality development, reducing the risk of entrenched manipulative behaviors.

Emotional processing deficits, including alexithymia and anhedonia, are common among individuals with high Machiavellian traits and further hinder their capacity to form meaningful relationships. Alexithymia, which limits their ability to identify and articulate emotions, fosters emotional detachment, while anhedonia diminishes their motivation for emotionally fulfilling social interactions [13,15]. Together, these emotional impairments reinforce their reliance on manipulation as a primary social strategy. Moreover, trait-anxiety in Machiavellians complicates their interpersonal dynamics, as heightened sensitivity to social

risks reinforces their preference for calculated interactions over emotional engagement [13]. Psychotherapeutic interventions focused on emotional regulation and anxiety reduction could enhance emotional processing capabilities, helping individuals transition from manipulative tendencies to more authentic relational approaches [15]. These deficits also align Machiavellianism with broader Dark Triad tendencies, further emphasizing the shared interpersonal challenges within this personality cluster [18].

Machiavellianism, conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct encompassing manipulative tactics and cynical views, reveals distinct psychopathological patterns. Manipulative tactics are strongly associated with externalizing behaviors such as aggression and rule-breaking, while cynical views correlate with internalizing symptoms like depression and anxiety [1]. This dual nature illustrates how Machiavellianism operates on both behavioral and emotional domains, with manipulative actions driving social disruption and cynical worldviews fostering emotional struggles. Therapeutic approaches should address these dimensions by employing cognitive-behavioral techniques for externalizing behaviors and emotional support interventions for internalizing symptoms [1]. Understanding the interplay between these dimensions can inform tailored strategies to mitigate the distinct challenges posed by Machiavellians, promoting healthier psychological outcomes [1].

From an evolutionary perspective, Machiavellianism's emotional processing deficits, particularly the suppression of affective empathy, highlight its potential adaptive value in competitive social environments. The ability to understand others' emotional states cognitively, while avoiding emotional involvement, may have provided a survival advantage in hierarchical or adversarial contexts, where rational decision-making outweighed emotional considerations [19]. This strategic detachment enables Machiavellians to navigate complex social dynamics effectively, reinforcing manipulative behaviors as adaptive strategies rather than pathological tendencies [14]. However, therapeutic interventions must account for this framework by encouraging cooperative and ethical strategies that align with interpersonal success while reducing reliance on manipulative tactics [19]. This perspective underscores the challenges of addressing Machiavellian traits in therapy, as their behaviors are often deeply ingrained and perceived as functional within their social environments.

In conclusion, emotional processing and empathy deficits are central to understanding Machiavellianism's psychological mechanisms. The dichotomy between cognitive and affective empathy, alongside emotional detachment and alexithymia, underscores the complexity of their interpersonal behaviors. These mechanisms not only facilitate manipulative tendencies but also hinder the development of meaningful relationships, raising significant implications for therapeutic intervention and broader social dynamics.

### **Cognitive Patterns**

Cognitive patterns in Machiavellian individuals are characterized by a strategic and goal-oriented mindset that prioritizes calculated manipulation and long-term planning. This approach enables them to navigate social contexts with precision, often at the expense of ethical considerations. Research emphasizes that high-Machiavellian individuals adopt a pragmatic perspective whereby their cognitive strategies are continuously aligned to maximize personal gain while minimizing risks [3,7]. This reliance on strategic thinking is a defining attribute of Machiavellianism, as it contrasts sharply with the impulsivity observed in psychopathy,

reinforcing the preference for rationality over immediacy in decision-making. Individuals with high Machiavellian traits excel at adapting to social environments, often by modifying their behavior to appear cooperative or altruistic when it serves their objectives [1,3]. This flexibility ensures that their actions remain tightly coordinated with their long-term goals, highlighting a cognitive framework that is inherently manipulative and utilitarian. While this adaptability may yield short-term successes, it raises ethical dilemmas by fostering mistrust and undermining the integrity of interpersonal interactions.

The cynical worldview inherent to Machiavellianism profoundly shapes the cognitive patterns of individuals who possess high levels of this trait. Such individuals frequently assume that others are motivated solely by self-interest, which not only rationalizes their own manipulative tendencies but also reinforces an overall distrust of social interactions [1,3]. This pervasive skepticism serves as a self-reinforcing mechanism, justifying exploitative actions as a necessary response to a deceitful and competitive social world. For example, Machiavellians often approach interpersonal relationships with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style, emphasizing self-reliance and emotional distance rather than fostering meaningful connections [4]. This cognitive tendency to distrust others extends beyond personal relationships to professional and societal contexts. High-Machiavellian individuals frequently scrutinize the motives of colleagues or subordinates, perceiving them as potential threats even in neutral scenarios [1]. This general distrust reduces the likelihood of engaging in long-term cooperative strategies, as Machiavellians prioritize immediate gains over the cultivation of mutual trust [3]. Such behaviors underscore an ethical vacuum in their cognitive processes, whereby societal norms and ethical guidelines are considered optional rather than obligatory [1]. Although this distrust might serve as an adaptive strategy in certain competitive contexts, it undermines the prospects for genuine collaboration and mutual support.

Machiavellian individuals exhibit a notable divergence between cognitive and affective empathy, with their cognitive empathy often being highly developed to facilitate social manipulation. Cognitive empathy allows them to accurately predict and understand others' emotional states, which they then use strategically to manipulate interpersonal dynamics in their favor [1,5]. This manipulation is exemplified in conflict resolution scenarios, where Machiavellians leverage their cognitive empathy to psychologically outpace opponents and secure their objectives, often at the expense of ethical fairness [3]. Despite this advanced ability to comprehend emotional cues, Machiavellians lack affective empathy, which impairs their capacity for genuine emotional engagement or concern for others' well-being [5]. This imbalance is exacerbated by their adept application of Theory of Mind (ToM), which enables them to exploit others' vulnerabilities, such as insecurities or unfulfilled desires, to achieve self-serving goals [14]. The instrumental nature of their cognitive empathy allows them to feign emotional responses as a means of gaining trust, while remaining emotionally detached. Although this capability may serve as a resource in professional settings, such as in leadership roles, it raises significant ethical concerns regarding the exploitation of cognitive skills for manipulative purposes [5]. This emotional-cognitive dichotomy further underscores the complexity of their interpersonal behavior, revealing a pronounced disparity between understanding emotions and experiencing them.

The two-dimensional model of Machiavellianism, which distinguishes between cynical views and exploitative tactics,

provides critical insight into the cognitive and emotional implications of this personality construct. The "views" dimension reflects a negative perception of human nature and corresponds with emotional deficits, including alexithymia and diminished affective empathy [1]. This emotional detachment perpetuates feelings of isolation and disconnection, aligning with internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression [7]. In contrast, the "tactics" dimension encompasses the pragmatic manipulation of social contexts to achieve self-serving objectives. These tactics often involve deceit, exploitation, and calculated compromise, showcasing a behavioral adaptability that is highly goal-oriented [3]. This distinction between views and tactics illustrates the paradoxical nature of Machiavellian cognition: while their negative perceptions of humanity drive emotional disengagement, their behavioral strategies emphasize rationality and adaptability. The contrasting implications of these dimensions are also evident in stress responses, with cynical views correlating with psychological vulnerabilities, whereas manipulative tactics are associated with externalizing behaviors like rule-breaking or aggression [1]. Understanding these dual mechanisms is crucial for therapeutic interventions, as addressing cynical perspectives may involve fostering emotional trust, while targeting exploitative tactics requires challenging preexisting manipulative patterns [1].

Emotional detachment and alexithymia are significant contributors to the distinct cognitive patterns observed in high-Machiavellian individuals, allowing them to suppress emotional interference in decision-making. Emotional detachment operates as a protective mechanism, enabling them to maintain rationality and composure even in high-stakes or emotionally charged situations [1]. This pragmatic approach is particularly advantageous in competitive scenarios, such as business negotiations, where emotional neutrality enhances their strategic edge [3]. Alexithymia, characterized by difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, reinforces this detachment, fostering a transactional perspective on relationships and undermining emotional authenticity [15]. This emotional neutrality also amplifies their ability to manipulate others, as it eliminates the guilt or moral conflict typically associated with deceitful actions [14]. However, despite its strategic benefits, emotional detachment often impedes the development of meaningful relationships, leading to social isolation and a higher risk of psychological distress [20]. These cognitive patterns reveal a double-edged nature, where emotional detachment supports Machiavellians' manipulative tendencies but simultaneously exacerbates their interpersonal challenges.

Evolutionary psychology perspectives suggest that the cognitive patterns associated with Machiavellianism may have conferred adaptive advantages in competitive social environments. Strategic manipulation and distrust likely served as survival mechanisms in hierarchical or resource-scarce contexts, where the ability to navigate social alliances and outmaneuver competitors was critical [7,20]. These traits enabled Machiavellians to establish dominance and secure resources without succumbing to vulnerabilities caused by trust or emotional engagement [19]. However, the utility of these traits diminishes in modern cooperative environments, where trust and collaboration are essential for long-term success. This incongruity often results in interpersonal conflicts and diminished social cohesion, highlighting the maladaptive aspects of Machiavellian strategies in contemporary contexts [7]. Comparisons can be drawn to early-life iron deficiency, which, while adaptive in periods of immediate survival, impairs cognitive and emotional development over the long term, illustrating the multifaceted nature of these adaptive mechanisms [21]. Although Machiavellians may excel in competitive professions, such as

politics or business, their manipulative and distrustful tendencies often lead to reputational damage and strained relationships, underscoring the long-term costs of their cognitive strategies [1]. Understanding these evolutionary underpinnings is essential for therapeutic approaches aimed at mitigating the maladaptive consequences of Machiavellian behavior while acknowledging the functional origins of these traits [20].

In summary, the cognitive patterns of Machiavellian individuals are shaped by their strategic thinking, cynical worldview, and emotional detachment. These features enable them to manipulate social contexts and navigate competitive environments effectively, often at the expense of ethical considerations and meaningful interpersonal connections. By examining these traits from psychological, evolutionary, and therapeutic perspectives, a deeper understanding of their implications for both individual and societal dynamics can be achieved.

### **Behavioral Manifestations**

Machiavellian individuals exhibit a range of behavioral manifestations that are quintessentially defined by deceitfulness, manipulation, and a preference for control over interpersonal interactions. A prominent behavioral trait is their strategic use of lying and flattery to achieve personal objectives. These tactics are often employed in a highly calculated manner, tailored to the specific social environment in which they operate. For example, Mandal and Kocur documented that lying (mean score 5.51) and seduction (mean score 4.97) were among the most commonly utilized manipulation techniques, even within therapeutic settings [11]. This aligns with Mesko et al., who identified the adaptability of such behaviors, emphasizing how high-Machiavellian individuals modify strategies to align with their goals, whether by appearing altruistic or adopting more direct manipulative approaches [3]. While these behaviors may yield short-term success, they often come at the expense of trust and long-term social stability, raising questions about their ethical implications. This context-specific adaptability highlights not only the pragmatic orientation of Machiavellian behavior but also its potential for causing significant harm in interpersonal relationships.

The ability to conceal motives further underscores the behavioral complexity of Machiavellian individuals. Often, their true intentions remain hidden as they use deception to optimize their social advantage. Loftus and Glenwick note that adolescents with high Machiavellian traits lack sufficient cognitive empathy and thus engage in exploitative actions devoid of emotional involvement [16]. This lack of emotional resonance facilitates the manipulation of others, allowing Machiavellians to control social dynamics effectively. Furthermore, Mesko et al. observed that high-Machiavellian individuals often disguise self-serving actions as altruistic, thereby enhancing their reputation and social standing [3]. This is deeply intertwined with their cynical worldview, as noted by Monaghan et al., where the belief that others are equally untrustworthy validates their manipulative strategies [1]. While such behaviors may appear functional in competitive environments, they also erode the authenticity of interpersonal connections, leading to broader ethical and social consequences. These patterns encourage an ongoing dialogue about the long-term societal impact of concealed and exploitative behavioral strategies.

A critical component of Machiavellian behavior is the exploitation of cognitive empathy for manipulative purposes, coupled with an evident lack of affective empathy. This divergence allows Machiavellians to understand others' emotions without forming

meaningful emotional connections, treating relationships as instruments for personal gain [16]. highlighted this disparity, noting that cognitive empathy enables Machiavellians to predict and manipulate others' emotional states effectively, all while remaining emotionally detached [13]. Such an approach amplifies their ability to control social contexts strategically, as emotional engagement is not a barrier to their manipulative actions. Mandal and Kocur further observed that this emotional detachment manifests in tactics such as guilt induction and seduction, which are frequently employed to manipulate interpersonal dynamics [11]. The instrumental nature of relationships for Machiavellians reflects a broader pattern of emotional disengagement that not only limits the possibility of genuine connections but also exacerbates adversarial relational patterns. This behavioral orientation raises significant concerns about the ethical dimensions of employing cognitive skills for manipulation while sidelining emotional reciprocity.

Emotional detachment serves as another defining feature of Machiavellian behavior, enabling individuals to pursue their strategic objectives with minimal ethical interference. McIlwain pointed out that this detachment results from deficits in affective empathy, allowing Machiavellians to engage in manipulative behaviors without experiencing guilt or remorse [14]. Pelz elaborated on how this emotional suppression facilitates their ability to regulate impulsive decisions and maintain a long-term focus on strategic goals [22]. This phenomenon aligns with observations by Mandal and Kocur, who reported frequent manipulative behaviors in therapeutic settings, including guilt induction and refusal to speak, highlighting the calculated use of emotional control. Monaghan et al [11], emphasized that this persistent emotional distance reflects the broader relational style of Machiavellians, who perceive interpersonal connections not as opportunities for mutual benefit but as platforms for control and exploitation [1]. While this detachment may offer a tactical advantage in competitive scenarios, it significantly undermines the potential for meaningful and cooperative relationships, thereby contributing to relational instability.

In conflict situations, high-Machiavellian individuals demonstrate a marked preference for competitive and compromising strategies, reflecting their egoistic and goal-oriented nature. Mesko et al. found that these individuals score significantly higher on competitive conflict resolution modes, prioritizing self-interest and personal advantage over collaborative outcomes [3]. Interestingly, compromising strategies are often utilized as pragmatic tools rather than genuine efforts toward cooperation. These calculated compromises enable Machiavellians to achieve their goals while maintaining an appearance of collaboration, as such behaviors are context-dependent and strategically adaptive [3]. Their alignment with competitive and compromising tactics further exemplifies their flexibility in navigating social dynamics, as they are adept at altering their approach to suit specific conflict scenarios [1]. In stark contrast, Machiavellians generally avoid accommodating or avoiding strategies that require self-sacrifice or deferment, as these approaches conflict with their assertive and control-driven tendencies [3]. This behavioral adaptability in conflict situations underscores both their manipulative acumen and the relational challenges posed by their self-serving focus.

Gender differences in Machiavellian behaviors provide additional insights into the complexity of their manifestations. Research consistently shows that men score higher on Machiavellian traits overall, suggesting a stronger alignment with manipulative and strategic behaviors that may reflect evolutionary adaptations [8,11].

These tendencies align with findings that men often approach manipulation through dominance and strategic exploitation, which may confer advantages in competitive environments [8]. In contrast, women are more likely to employ relational tactics such as guilt induction and seduction, as noted by Mandal and Kocur [11]. These differences may stem from varying social expectations and adaptive strategies shaped by gender roles. For example, women may adopt manipulative strategies focused on social cohesion and relational control, while men prioritize tactics aimed at asserting dominance [11]. Understanding these distinctions is critical for therapeutic approaches, as interventions need to account for the specific patterns and origins of manipulative behavior across genders. Tailored strategies could address these patterns effectively, mitigating the social and interpersonal challenges posed by Machiavellian traits.

Finally, the behavioral flexibility and adaptability of Machiavellian individuals are underpinned by their cynical worldview, which rationalizes manipulation as a necessary survival strategy in a competitive and distrustful social environment. Concealing true intentions and altering social personas are key components of their strategic approach, allowing Machiavellians to navigate diverse contexts with minimal exposure to risk. Monaghan et al. emphasized that such behaviors are deeply rooted in a worldview where trust is minimal, and manipulation is a rational response to perceived threats [1]. Mesko et al. further highlighted how Machiavellians may present themselves as altruistic in public settings to enhance their social reputation, all while maintaining exploitative private intentions [3]. This behavioral duality not only reflects the broader traits of the Dark Triad but also distinguishes Machiavellianism through its calculated and long-term orientation [1]. While this adaptability may provide short-term advantages, the ethical implications and long-term relational costs of such behaviors warrant further critical examination. These patterns underscore the importance of addressing the cultural and evolutionary factors that perpetuate such behaviors, as well as their broader societal impact.

In conclusion, the behavioral manifestations of Machiavellianism, characterized by manipulation, emotional detachment, and strategic adaptability, reveal a complex interplay of cognitive and emotional dynamics. These behaviors, while functional in competitive scenarios, often compromise ethical principles and relational integrity, raising significant implications for both therapeutic intervention and societal outcomes.

### **Therapeutic Implications**

Exploring the complexities of Machiavellian traits unveils significant therapeutic challenges and opportunities for intervention. The subsequent sections will address the barriers faced in clinical settings, including emotional detachment and manipulative behaviors that complicate the therapeutic relationship. Various treatment approaches will be presented, highlighting strategies that promote emotional awareness, ethical reasoning, and interpersonal skills. Through this examination, the intricate interplay between psychology and therapy will become evident, paving the way for more effective strategies tailored to the unique dynamics of Machiavellian individuals.

### **Challenges in Clinical Settings**

The clinical challenges associated with working with individuals who exhibit high Machiavellian traits represent a multidimensional issue for therapists. One of the most persistent obstacles is the difficulty in developing a therapeutic alliance due to emotional detachment and manipulative tendencies. These traits disrupt

trust-building, which is integral to therapeutic progress. Emotional detachment, characterized by deficits in affective empathy, discourages clients from emotionally investing in therapy, leading to superficial interactions. This detachment is often accompanied by a cynical worldview, which frames the therapist-client relationship as a strategic exchange rather than a genuine partnership [1]. High-Machiavellian individuals frequently exploit relationships for opportunistic gains, making them resistant to forming meaningful connections even within a therapeutic setting [20]. The result is often a strained therapeutic dynamic where trust and rapport are undermined, and meaningful progress becomes significantly more challenging to achieve.

Machiavellian clients also tend to manipulate the therapeutic process to serve their own agendas, posing unique ethical challenges. For instance, these individuals may use therapy sessions as a platform to refine their interpersonal manipulation techniques. Exploiting the controlled therapeutic environment, they might experiment with different tactics to observe their efficacy, thereby complicating the ethical responsibilities of clinicians [23]. Moreover, therapy may be strategically leveraged for non-therapeutic purposes, such as gaining legal advantages, improving public image, or eliciting sympathy. These behaviors reflect a calculated social strategy that raises critical ethical concerns for therapists, who must remain vigilant in identifying and mitigating such exploitation [24]. Additionally, Machiavellian clients may appear outwardly cooperative to mislead the therapist, presenting as highly compliant or as model patients to obscure their true motives. This calculated performance can complicate accurate diagnoses and interventions, emphasizing the need for objective, evidence-based assessments and structured therapeutic frameworks to counteract potential manipulation [24].

The emotional deficits of Machiavellian individuals, including a lack of affective empathy and the presence of alexithymia, further complicate therapeutic engagement. These gaps hinder their ability to engage in reflective practices essential for emotional growth and self-awareness, both of which are critical for successful therapy. Alexithymia, defined as difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, severely impairs their capacity to meaningfully explore their emotional experiences during sessions [16]. This deficit often results in resistance to emotional exploration, with Machiavellian clients rationalizing or minimizing their feelings instead of engaging with them. Structured techniques like role-playing and empathy training can be employed to address these emotional processing difficulties but require consistent effort and adaptation by therapists [1]. Moreover, their lack of self-empathy and inability to understand the emotional repercussions of their actions on others serves as a significant barrier to achieving therapeutic goals. Cognitive-behavioral interventions that emphasize ethical reasoning and self-perception restructuring can help bridge this gap, but progress in these areas is often slow and met with resistance [20].

Maintaining professional boundaries represents another critical challenge when working with Machiavellian clients, who are adept at exploiting interpersonal dynamics. These individuals may adopt specific roles, such as the "helper" role, to manipulate therapists' perceptions and gain undue favor. By presenting themselves as contributors to the therapeutic process, they obscure their true intentions and often undermine the objectivity required for effective treatment [23]. Similarly, the "model patient" role allows them to project an image of compliance, further complicating accurate clinical assessments and interventions [24]. Such tactics emphasize the necessity for therapists to implement strict ethical

boundaries and rely on objective, evidence-based strategies. Furthermore, countertransference risks—where therapists may unintentionally react emotionally to manipulative behaviors—highlight the importance of self-reflection and regular professional supervision to maintain impartiality [23]. The reputational risks posed by manipulation within the therapeutic context further underscore the need for meticulous documentation and adherence to ethical standards to safeguard therapeutic integrity [24].

Another barrier in therapy lies in the inherent distrust of authority typical of Machiavellian individuals. Clients with these traits often view therapists as figures of control rather than allies, undermining the collaborative ethos necessary for effective psychotherapy. This skepticism often manifests in questioning treatment recommendations or intentionally delaying progress, as clients work to preserve their autonomy and control within the therapeutic setting [20]. Non-compliance with treatment plans is a recurring issue, as Machiavellians frequently prioritize their self-determined goals over the collaborative goals outlined by therapy. Therapists can counteract this resistance by employing motivational interviewing techniques that address client ambivalence and align therapeutic aims with the client's perceived long-term objectives [1]. Transparent communication, which builds credibility and fosters engagement, is critical in overcoming the skepticism and resistance that often characterizes Machiavellian interactions [20].

The environmental and psychopathological factors influencing Machiavellian clients further complicate therapy. Maladaptive upbringing, often characterized by neglect or inconsistent discipline, contributes to the development of Machiavellian traits and requires thorough exploration during therapy. For example, schema-focused cognitive therapy can address deeply ingrained maladaptive schemas, such as entitlement and exploitation, which are commonly observed in these individuals [16]. Externalizing symptoms, including delinquent or aggressive behaviors, frequently co-occur with high Machiavellian traits and represent additional therapeutic challenges. Problem-solving skills training has demonstrated efficacy in mitigating these behaviors by promoting alternative coping mechanisms [16]. However, some clients may use sessions to rationalize manipulative behaviors rather than confront underlying psychological issues. Addressing these tendencies requires targeted interventions that challenge and restructure maladaptive beliefs, emphasizing the importance of tailored therapeutic strategies to reduce manipulative tendencies and promote healthier interpersonal patterns [1].

Overall, the challenges in clinical settings when working with Machiavellian individuals necessitate a multifaceted and ethically vigilant approach. The interplay of emotional detachment, manipulation, trust deficits, and environmental influences complicates therapeutic engagement, requiring therapists to adopt proactive and structured strategies tailored to each client's unique psychopathological profile.

### Treatment Approaches

Addressing Machiavellian traits in therapeutic interventions requires a multifaceted approach that focuses on building emotional awareness and fostering empathy. Research suggests that interventions such as role-taking exercises, empathy training, and schema-focused cognitive therapy can cultivate emotional insight and reduce manipulative behaviors [16]. Role-taking exercises are particularly valuable in challenging the emotional detachment exhibited by Machiavellian individuals. These activities encourage clients to cognitively engage with others' perspectives, promoting a deeper understanding of emotional

experiences that they would typically disregard. Empathy training further addresses the discrepancy between cognitive and affective empathy common in individuals with high Machiavellian traits. Encouraging emotional sharing and reflection not only mitigates emotional insensitivity but also leverages their cognitive empathy to foster genuine connections. Schema-focused cognitive therapy contributes by identifying and restructuring maladaptive schemas such as mistrust and entitlement, which underpin manipulative tendencies [16]. However, the success of these interventions may be moderated by the individual's level of self-awareness and willingness to engage in emotional exploration, emphasizing the need for therapists to adopt a patient and adaptive stance. Integrating these methods cohesively, along with tailored reflective exercises, could promote self-awareness and gradually shift the individual's interpersonal approach from exploitative to cooperative [25].

Personality interventions that target agreeableness have demonstrated promise in reducing Machiavellian tendencies, as agreeableness is inversely correlated with manipulative behaviors [25]. Interventions employing weekly behavioral challenges have been particularly effective in fostering gradual changes in personality traits such as agreeableness, emotional stability, and extraversion. These challenges encourage incremental behavioral adjustments, providing consistent opportunities to practice non-manipulative, cooperative behaviors. For instance, higher agreeableness promotes collaboration, reducing the likelihood of exploitative actions in interpersonal dynamics [25]. Moreover, by enhancing emotional stability, such interventions help individuals manage their heightened sensitivity to perceived social risks, which often fuels manipulative defenses. Interestingly, while strategies targeting extraversion also yield benefits, they may indirectly challenge Machiavellians to adopt less detached and more engaging social strategies, thus disrupting their reliance on emotional distance. However, these interventions require careful monitoring, as the deeply ingrained nature of Machiavellian traits may render some individuals resistant to change. Furthermore, while reliable for instigating gradual improvement, such strategies must be reinforced in the long term to ensure sustainable personality shifts that align with ethical and adaptive social behaviors [25].

Cognitive-behavioral strategies are instrumental in addressing the maladaptive cognitive frameworks that rationalize manipulation and distrust. These interventions aim to challenge and reconstruct the cynical and exploitative worldviews held by Machiavellian individuals [1]. By targeting the "views" dimension of Machiavellianism, which is characterized by generalized mistrust, therapists encourage clients to adopt healthier beliefs about human nature and interpersonal trust. Exercises focused on validating positive relational experiences can help mitigate pervasive distrust, allowing clients to gradually consider alternative, less manipulative strategies [1]. The "tactics" dimension, in contrast, involves structured exercises to curb exploitative tendencies, such as practicing ethical collaboration and identifying cognitive distortions like entitlement. These tailored interventions ensure that both dimensions of Machiavellianism are adequately addressed. Integrating real-world scenarios into therapy provides clients with the opportunity to apply their newly developed strategies, reinforcing ethical problem-solving techniques in practical contexts. However, therapists must remain vigilant, as the long-term orientation of Machiavellian cognitive processes may lead clients to superficially adopt these strategies for immediate gains while retaining their manipulative core beliefs. As such, fostering genuine internalization of these methods is critical to achieving meaningful and lasting therapeutic outcomes [1].

Promoting ethical decision-making and enhancing moral reasoning are pivotal in addressing the self-serving focus often observed in Machiavellian individuals. These interventions emphasize the development of ethical frameworks, guiding clients to critically evaluate the broader implications of their actions for both themselves and others [1,16]. Structured discussions on ethical dilemmas are particularly effective in prompting clients to examine fairness, empathy, and societal norms within decision-making processes. Role-play exercises, where clients adopt the perspectives of those affected by their actions, further challenge their emotional detachment while fostering accountability and ethical awareness. Reinforcement mechanisms, which reward cooperative and moral behaviors, align with clients' goal-oriented nature, presenting ethical decision-making as advantageous rather than obligatory. However, the intrinsic lack of motivation to uphold ethical standards complicates this approach, as clients may view moral reasoning exercises as abstract or irrelevant to their objectives. Therapists must counteract this resistance by demonstrating the tangible benefits, such as enhanced relationships or professional success, that ethical conduct can yield over time. Ultimately, these interventions aim to instill a deeper understanding of how manipulative behaviors degrade trust and social cohesion, encouraging Machiavellians to reevaluate their strategies in favor of ethical principles [1].

Incorporating psychophysiological elements into therapy offers innovative avenues for addressing emotional detachment and alexithymic tendencies in Machiavellian clients. Research highlights the influence of non-verbal behaviors, such as upright posture, on emotional engagement and mood regulation [20]. Encouraging clients to adopt positive postures during therapy sessions has been shown to improve mood, reduce fatigue, and enhance brain oxygenation, thereby facilitating more effective emotional and cognitive processing. These physiological enhancements can complement traditional therapeutic techniques, serving as an accessible method to promote emotional involvement. For instance, by improving intrinsic motivation through posture-based strategies, therapists may foster deeper engagement in the therapeutic process despite clients' skepticism toward conventional psychological practices. Moreover, these techniques provide measurable benefits, which can be particularly compelling for individuals resistant to abstract therapeutic concepts. While the integration of psychophysiological methods represents a promising adjunct to therapy, their efficacy relies on consistent application and alignment with broader therapeutic goals. When combined with empathy-based and cognitive-behavioral strategies, these interventions create a multimodal approach capable of addressing the complex interplay of emotional and physiological detachment in Machiavellian individuals [20].

Therapists must also address the broader psychopathological manifestations of Machiavellianism, including externalizing behaviors and difficulties in emotional regulation, through targeted strategies. Problem-solving skills training has proven effective in teaching clients constructive methods for navigating interpersonal challenges, reducing their reliance on manipulative tactics [16]. This approach emphasizes ethical and cooperative problem-solving techniques, fostering a shift toward healthier interactions. Emotional regulation interventions similarly address critical deficits such as alexithymia, enabling clients to better identify and express their emotions while enhancing their capacity for empathy. Mindfulness techniques, integrated into these programs, have shown promise in promoting sustained attention to emotional experiences, mitigating impulsive reactions, and encouraging reflective practices [1]. Addressing externalizing

symptoms, such as delinquent behaviors, further supports the reduction of manipulative tendencies by equipping clients with alternative coping mechanisms. However, these interventions require careful adaptation to ensure their relevance to the specific cognitive and emotional profiles of high-Machiavellian individuals. A unified framework that combines these strategies is most likely to effectively target the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive challenges associated with Machiavellian traits, fostering long-term improvement in interpersonal relationships and overall psychological well-being [1].

Overall, the treatment of Machiavellian traits necessitates a comprehensive and integrative approach, combining emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological strategies to address the multifaceted challenges posed by these individuals. By tailoring interventions to individual profiles and emphasizing long-term ethical and emotional growth, therapists can foster meaningful change.

### **Clinical Outcomes and Future Directions**

Understanding the clinical implications of Machiavellian traits reveals critical insights into therapeutic challenges and strategies for effective intervention. The exploration of evidence-based outcomes highlights the multifaceted nature of these traits and their association with both internalizing and externalizing psychopathologies. By examining treatment approaches and therapeutic recommendations, readers will gain valuable perspectives on how to foster meaningful change in individuals exhibiting high Machiavellianism, paving the way for future research and practice in addressing these complex behaviors. This discussion builds on previous explorations of psychological mechanisms and societal implications, connecting the dots between theory and practical application.

### **Evidence-Based Results**

The topic of Machiavellianism and its association with psychopathological behaviors has garnered significant attention in psychological research, offering critical insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of these traits. Research by Monaghan et al. demonstrates the strong association between Machiavellian traits and externalizing psychopathological outcomes, including impulsivity, thought dysfunction, and manipulative conduct [1]. Notably, cognitive patterns related to Machiavellian "views"—characterized by distrustful and cynical perspectives—are implicated in internalizing psychopathologies such as anxiety and depression. This suggests that the negative worldview prevalent among Machiavellian individuals not only exacerbates emotional distress but also reinforces maladaptive interpersonal strategies, making intervention particularly challenging. By linking these persistent cognitive distortions to psychological distress, Monaghan et al. underscore the importance of addressing these negative schemas in therapeutic interventions to mitigate their broader emotional and behavioral consequences [1].

Monaghan et al. further differentiate between the cognitive "views" dimension and the behavioral "tactics" of Machiavellianism, emphasizing the distinct psychopathological implications of each [1]. While "views" predict internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, "tactics" are more closely linked to externalizing behaviors, including aggression and rule-breaking. This dual-dimensional framework deepens our understanding of the functional mechanisms underlying Machiavellian traits and suggests specific intervention points for therapy. The emphasis on manipulative tactics as a behavioral strategy reflects the social disruptiveness of Machiavellianism, highlighting its

capacity to undermine interpersonal and societal dynamics. The study's findings reinforce the necessity for tailored approaches that address both the emotional and behavioral dimensions of Machiavellianism, emphasizing structured therapeutic strategies that target maladaptive thought patterns and exploitative behaviors to foster healthier interpersonal relationships.

Adolescents with high levels of Machiavellian traits exhibit a particularly concerning pattern of low cognitive empathy, as evidenced in the study by Loftus and Glenwick [16]. This deficiency impairs their ability to understand others' perspectives, contributing to manipulative behaviors and delinquent activities. The study's findings advocate for the use of targeted interventions, such as problem-solving skills training and role-playing exercises, to address these emotional and behavioral deficits. These approaches emphasize the development of constructive social strategies and promote a deeper emotional connection to others' perspectives, effectively countering the emotionally detached worldview characteristic of Machiavellian individuals. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of early intervention to prevent the reinforcement of maladaptive behaviors, which can become deeply ingrained and more resistant to change over time. By addressing cognitive empathy deficits and fostering healthier interpersonal dynamics, therapeutic approaches can mitigate the long-term negative impacts of Machiavellianism on both individuals and their social environments.

The findings by Loftus and Glenwick also suggest that addressing delinquent behaviors specifically in adolescents with Machiavellian traits can reduce antisocial outcomes [16]. These externalizing behaviors, often rooted in manipulative tactics, reflect the broader social consequences of Machiavellianism in developmental contexts. The emphasis on empathy-building exercises, such as role-playing, not only challenges the emotional detachment exhibited by these individuals but also fosters the emotional insight necessary for healthier interpersonal functioning. Interventions like problem-solving skills training further equip adolescents with practical tools to navigate social challenges without resorting to manipulation, promoting adaptive and cooperative behaviors. These strategies are critical in reshaping the interpersonal tendencies of Machiavellian adolescents, preventing the escalation of antisocial behaviors into adulthood.

In examining the broader therapeutic outcomes for individuals with Machiavellian traits, Bucher et al. demonstrate that personality-related factors significantly influence treatment success [26]. Traits such as agreeableness and extraversion are positively correlated with better therapeutic improvements, suggesting that the low levels of these traits typically observed in Machiavellian individuals may hinder therapeutic progress. For example, low agreeableness impedes the formation of a strong therapeutic alliance, a critical component for successful treatment outcomes. Tailored strategies, such as those aimed at fostering cooperation and interpersonal trust, may therefore be necessary to overcome this barrier. Similarly, the emotional detachment and distrust associated with low extraversion in Machiavellian clients further complicate therapy, requiring interventions that promote emotional openness and vulnerability. Bucher et al. advocate for early identification of these personality barriers to improve treatment outcomes, emphasizing the need for personality assessments as part of individualized treatment planning [26]. Longer therapy durations have been shown to yield more positive outcomes for personality-based challenges, including Machiavellian traits. Bucher et al. highlight the gradual nature of personality change, particularly for deeply ingrained traits

like cynicism and manipulateness [26]. Sustained therapeutic engagement provides the necessary time to build trust and address the emotional complexities and cognitive distortions inherent to Machiavellianism. Notably, shorter interventions may fail to adequately address these challenges, underscoring the importance of long-term treatment plans tailored to the client's specific needs. By emphasizing a collaborative and patient approach, therapists can navigate the resistance often exhibited by Machiavellian individuals, fostering meaningful and lasting change over time.

The two-dimensional framework of Machiavellianism proposed by Monaghan et al. has significant implications for therapeutic interventions [1]. The distinction between "views" and "tactics" allows for a more nuanced understanding of the cognitive and behavioral manifestations of Machiavellian traits, enabling targeted interventions for each dimension. For instance, while structured exercises can challenge the manipulative tendencies associated with "tactics," cognitive-behavioral strategies can address the distrust and cynicism central to "views." These findings underscore the complexity of Machiavellianism as a personality trait and the necessity for multidimensional treatment approaches that address both its emotional and behavioral components.

The ethical considerations associated with treating Machiavellian clients are also critical to understanding the challenges posed by these individuals in therapeutic contexts. Loftus and Glenwick and Monaghan et al. emphasize the importance of maintaining strict professional boundaries to prevent clients from exploiting therapeutic dynamics [1,16]. For example, schema-focused cognitive therapy can address the maladaptive belief systems that underpin manipulative behaviors, fostering greater self-awareness and ethical decision-making. However, the potential for clients to manipulate or mislead therapists necessitates vigilant oversight and adherence to evidence-based practices. Ethical complexities further highlight the need for specialized training for therapists, ensuring that they are well-equipped to navigate the unique challenges posed by high-Machiavellian clients and maintain the integrity of the therapeutic process.

The multidimensional psychopathological constructs associated with Machiavellianism, as reviewed in studies by Monaghan et al. and Loftus and Glenwick, reveal the significant impact of these traits on both internalizing and externalizing symptoms [1,16]. Given the tendency of Machiavellian individuals to exploit therapeutic relationships, integrating structured interventions like schema-focused cognitive therapy and ethical reasoning exercises becomes critical. These approaches address the underlying cognitive and emotional deficits associated with Machiavellianism while emphasizing the importance of professional boundaries to safeguard the therapeutic alliance. Furthermore, research by Bucher et al. underscores the necessity of sustained therapeutic engagement, highlighting the need for long-term intervention strategies to promote meaningful and lasting change in individuals with high levels of cynicism and manipulateness [26]. Collectively, these studies provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by Machiavellianism in clinical settings, emphasizing the importance of tailored therapeutic approaches that integrate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions.

### **Therapeutic Recommendations**

Addressing Machiavellian traits in therapeutic interventions is a complex yet essential task. Role-playing exercises and empathy training are promising methods for promoting emotional awareness and enhancing cognitive empathy in individuals with high levels of Machiavellian tendencies. Role-playing enables clients to

experientially engage in perspective-taking by stepping into others' viewpoints within controlled clinical settings. This approach challenges the cognitive distortions often used by Machiavellian individuals to rationalize manipulative behaviors. Through repeated exposure to such exercises, clients begin to shift their perception of human interactions from self-serving transactions to experiences rooted in mutual understanding. Empathy training complements these techniques by targeting the specific discrepancy between cognitive empathy, which is often intact in Machiavellian individuals, and affective empathy, which is typically diminished. By fostering emotional recognition and training clients to develop compassionate responses, empathy training addresses the emotional detachment defining Machiavellian behaviors [16]. These interventions not only reduce externalizing behaviors, such as delinquency, but also facilitate the formation of meaningful relationships by underlining the impact of one's actions on others. Role-playing scenarios that simulate interpersonal conflicts further help clients practice constructive problem-solving strategies and reflect on their emotional responses, fostering greater self-awareness and prosocial behavior.

Schema-focused cognitive therapy represents another critical intervention, addressing the maladaptive thought patterns and early schemas often associated with Machiavellian traits. Studies highlight significant correlations between Dark Triad traits, including Machiavellianism, and schemas such as entitlement, insufficient self-control, and abandonment [27]. By targeting these schemas, therapy enables clients to restructure their worldview and adopt more adaptive behaviors. For example, entitlement schemas—which reinforce self-centered beliefs and exploitative expectations—are systematically challenged to help clients acknowledge the relational consequences of their behavior. Through critical self-reflection and therapist-assisted cognitive restructuring, clients are encouraged to develop realistic, empathetic perspectives that promote healthier interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, the insufficient self-control schema, which contributes to impulsive and manipulative behaviors, is addressed through the development of regulatory skills that foster patience and self-discipline. Another maladaptive schema linked to Machiavellianism is abandonment or instability, which often underpins a dismissive-avoidant attachment style. Addressing this schema enhances emotional security, helping clients diminish defensive detachment. The integration of schema-focused techniques with empathy-building exercises provides a cohesive approach to mitigating the emotional disconnection underlying Machiavellianism, thus fostering greater emotional insight and relational engagement [27].

Cognitive-behavioral strategies play an essential role in directly challenging the manipulative thinking and cynical assumptions characteristic of Machiavellian individuals. These strategies involve examining and deconstructing the cognitive distortions that underpin exploitative behaviors. For instance, therapists help clients identify and question assumptions such as the belief that others are inherently selfish and therefore deserving of manipulation. Cognitive reappraisal techniques allow clients to replace these cynical perspectives with balanced and less distrustful views of human nature. Complementary behavioral techniques, such as thought-monitoring exercises or journaling, enable clients to recognize their manipulative tendencies and develop alternative, cooperative approaches to interpersonal challenges. Ethical reasoning exercises further reinforce these efforts by prompting clients to reflect on the broader consequences of their manipulative actions for themselves and others. These exercises encourage the cultivation of a moral framework for

decision-making, gradually replacing self-serving rationalizations with ethical considerations. Group cognitive-behavioral techniques offer an additional layer of intervention, as group dynamics provide opportunities for practicing non-manipulative interactions within a monitored, supportive environment. These experiential exercises help Machiavellian individuals learn to navigate social dynamics in ways that align with ethical and prosocial norms, fostering long-term behavioral change [23].

Behavioral interventions offer valuable strategies for increasing agreeableness, emotional stability, and trust in Machiavellian clients. Weekly behavioral challenges, designed to encourage acts of altruism or collaboration, are particularly effective for promoting prosocial behaviors. These activities directly address the antisocial tendencies associated with low agreeableness by providing structured opportunities to practice cooperative behaviors. Through incremental adjustments, clients gradually internalize these behaviors, leading to improved interpersonal functioning [16]. Enhancing emotional stability is another vital goal, as heightened emotional reactivity or detachment often complicates therapeutic engagement. Mindfulness-based practices and journaling exercises are particularly beneficial in helping clients regulate their emotions and reduce the anxiety that fuels manipulative defenses. Building trust through gradual exposure to vulnerability in safe environments allows clients to experience positive relational dynamics, effectively countering their cynical worldview. By fostering trust and authenticity in communication, these interventions encourage clients to prioritize cooperation over manipulation. Measuring changes in personality traits over time provides both clients and therapists with a tangible metric for assessing progress, reinforcing the value of these interventions in reducing manipulative tendencies and fostering healthier relationships [16].

The emotional deficits seen in Machiavellianism, such as alexithymia and low affective empathy, present significant therapeutic challenges but also provide specific intervention targets. Problem-solving training equips clients with constructive tools for managing interpersonal conflicts, emphasizing cooperation and fairness to reduce reliance on manipulative tactics. Emotional regulation techniques, including mindfulness-based stress reduction, help clients identify and process their emotional experiences, mitigating the emotional detachment that often characterizes Machiavellian behavior. Addressing alexithymia through targeted interventions—such as guided emotional exploration and labeling exercises—enhances clients' capacity for emotional insight and self-reflection. These methods are crucial for challenging the emotionally detached worldview that undermines their ability to form genuine connections [23]. Additionally, skill-building workshops focused on emotional and social competencies further support clients in improving interpersonal dynamics. Reflective exercises, such as guided journaling, allow clients to confront the consequences of their detached emotional responses, fostering greater alignment between their cognitive understanding and emotional experiences.

Promoting ethical decision-making frameworks is critical for enhancing moral reasoning and aligning client behavior with ethical standards. Therapists can incorporate frameworks such as Kohlberg's stages of moral development to guide clients toward more advanced levels of ethical reflection. Structured therapeutic exercises encourage clients to examine the long-term effects of their manipulative actions, prompting a shift from self-serving objectives to broader societal considerations [16]. Reflective journaling on past manipulative behaviors provides an opportunity

for clients to analyze the unintended negative consequences of their actions, helping them develop motivation for ethical improvement. Encouraging clients to engage in small acts of integrity, both during therapy and in real-world contexts, reinforces the alignment of their behaviors with ethical values. Hypothetical moral dilemmas allow clients to practice ethical decision-making within the safety of the therapeutic environment and apply these principles to their everyday interactions. These methods aim to foster an appreciation for justice, fairness, and reciprocity, ultimately reducing manipulative tendencies and encouraging prosocial engagement [27].

Altogether, therapeutic strategies for Machiavellian traits require an integrative approach that combines emotional, cognitive, and behavioral interventions tailored to each client's unique challenges. By addressing both the emotional detachment and manipulative tendencies inherent to this personality construct, therapy can promote meaningful and ethical behavioral changes.

### Conclusion

The exploration of Machiavellianism within this research has achieved the central objective of illuminating its psychological dimensions, therapeutic challenges, and intervention strategies, offering a robust framework for understanding and addressing this multifaceted construct in clinical practice. By systematically analyzing its core traits—manipulativeness, cynicism, emotional detachment, and deficits in affective empathy—the work has established a comprehensive understanding of how these characteristics manifest and interact within interpersonal and societal contexts. The nuanced distinction of Machiavellianism from related constructs, such as narcissism and psychopathy, has been an integral part of this investigation, highlighting its unique reliance on calculated, long-term strategies over impulsivity or grandiosity. This conceptual clarity has enabled the development and integration of targeted therapeutic approaches, underscoring the importance of addressing the distinct psychological mechanisms underlying Machiavellianism to mitigate its societal and relational impacts.

The research has examined the psychological mechanisms driving Machiavellian tendencies, revealing an intricate interplay between emotional processing deficits, cognitive manipulation, and behavioral manifestations. Emotional detachment, a lack of affective empathy, and conditions like alexithymia emerged as central contributors to the manipulative and utilitarian worldview that characterizes high-Machiavellian individuals. Cognitive patterns, such as a deeply ingrained cynical perspective and a pronounced reliance on cognitive empathy for exploitative purposes, were found to underpin their manipulative tactics while simultaneously alienating them from meaningful connections. These psychological factors interact synergistically, enabling Machiavellians to navigate social contexts effectively while maintaining emotional neutrality. Behavioral tendencies, including deceit, flattery, and opportunistic adaptability, were shown to consolidate their ability to control interpersonal dynamics, often at the expense of trust, cooperation, and ethical considerations. The research has thus synthesized these dimensions to present a coherent model of Machiavellianism that accounts for its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components.

Therapeutically, the work has highlighted the significant challenges posed by Machiavellian clients, from their resistance to forming genuine therapeutic alliances to their tendencies to manipulate the therapeutic process itself. Emotional detachment and a cynical

worldview frequently undermine trust-building within therapy, leading to a superficial engagement that complicates meaningful progress. Furthermore, the deliberate exploitation of therapy as a platform for refining manipulative strategies presents ethical dilemmas for clinicians. The findings stress that such clients often view therapeutic relationships through a transactional lens, perceiving them as opportunities for strategic advantage rather than avenues for self-improvement. As a result, therapists must navigate these dynamics with heightened vigilance, maintaining strict professional boundaries and employing structured, evidence-based interventions to counteract manipulation. This research has therefore offered critical insights into managing the unique dynamics of high-Machiavellian clients in clinical settings, emphasizing the ethical and practical considerations necessary for effective and responsible therapy.

The study has provided evidence-based therapeutic recommendations aimed at addressing both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of Machiavellianism. Interventions like empathy training, role-playing, and schema-focused cognitive therapy have been proposed to reduce emotional detachment and challenge maladaptive thought patterns. Empathy training, in particular, has been identified as vital for bridging the gap between cognitive and affective empathy, enabling clients to develop a deeper emotional connection with others. Schema-focused therapy offers a powerful tool for dismantling the entitlement, mistrust, and abandonment schemas underpinning manipulative behaviors, fostering healthier interpersonal dynamics. Additionally, cognitive-behavioral strategies targeting cynical worldviews and manipulative tendencies serve to reframe clients' perceptions of human interaction, encouraging cooperation and ethical decision-making. Behavioral interventions, such as weekly cooperative challenges and mindfulness-based techniques, complement these cognitive approaches by promoting incremental personality changes, including increased agreeableness and emotional stability. These strategies have demonstrated the potential to reduce reliance on manipulative tactics while fostering prosocial behavior, offering hope for meaningful therapeutic outcomes even with individuals who present high levels of resistance to change.

The findings of this research are firmly situated within the broader context of existing studies on personality psychology and the Dark Triad. The dual-dimensional framework of Machiavellianism—distinguishing between cynical "views" and exploitative "tactics"—has been particularly vital in advancing theoretical understanding and therapeutic applications. By addressing these dimensions separately, the research has emphasized the importance of targeted, multidimensional interventions that tackle both the emotional and behavioral components of Machiavellian traits. These insights align with prior studies that link Machiavellianism to deficits in emotional processing and manipulative social strategies, while also contributing unique perspectives on how these traits interact within therapeutic settings. Moreover, the evolutionary psychology perspective explored in this work has contextualized Machiavellianism as an adaptive response to competitive environments, offering a nuanced understanding of its functionality in specific contexts while highlighting its maladaptive implications in cooperative frameworks like therapy. This integration of psychological theory, clinical practice, and evolutionary perspectives underscores the interdisciplinary relevance of the findings and their contribution to the broader field of personality research.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustained impact of therapeutic interventions, particularly those aimed at fostering empathy and reducing manipulative behaviors. Investigating the interplay between emotional deficits and cognitive manipulation tactics will provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that sustain Machiavellianism, informing more targeted and effective treatments. Cultural and societal factors should also be explored to understand how different environments influence the development and expression of Machiavellian traits, potentially guiding the creation of culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches. Additionally, innovative techniques, such as psychophysiological interventions and advanced role-playing scenarios, warrant further examination for their potential to address emotional detachment and enhance ethical decision-making. Training programs for therapists must be developed to equip them with the skills needed to manage the unique challenges presented by Machiavellian clients, including maintaining professional boundaries and mitigating countertransference risks. This forward-looking perspective underscores the ongoing need for interdisciplinary and applied research to address the complexities of Machiavellianism in psychotherapy.

The research has ultimately deepened the understanding of Machiavellianism as a psychological construct and its implications for therapeutic practice. By integrating theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives, the work has provided actionable recommendations for addressing the challenges posed by this personality trait, fostering meaningful and ethical behavioral changes in high-Machiavellian clients. This contribution not only bridges gaps in clinical psychology but also lays the groundwork for future investigations aimed at refining treatment strategies and enhancing therapeutic outcomes. Through continued exploration and innovation, therapists and researchers can further advance the field, ensuring that individuals with Machiavellian traits are met with interventions that are both effective and ethically sound.

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