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WHY PEOPLE COMMIT INFIDELITY? 'NOTHING PERSONAL' OR 'VERY PERSONAL': MACHIAVELLIANISM AND SUBCLINICAL SADISM AS PREDICTORS OF INFIDELITY

ABSTRACT: Apart from the proximate incitement, infidelity implies an intention to inflict harm and suffering to a perpetrator's regular intimate partner for the sake of the perpetrator's own pleasure. The aim of this study was to determine whether Machiavellian deceit (infidelity as a conative style, i.e., 'nothing personal') or subclinical sadism (infidelity with the overt intention to hurt, i.e., 'very personal') is the dominant impetus of infidelity. Our data collected on 111 female and 48 male respondents indicated that Machiavellian antagonism and agency were the best predictors of adulterous behaviour, thus highlighting its 'nothing personal' dimension. No indices of subclinical sadism proved their incremental predictive power in the regression model, thus challenging the 'very personal' approach to the underpinnings of infidelity. In addition, there was no evidence of sex-related differences in proclivity to infidelity.

KEY WORDS: infidelity, Machiavellianism, subclinical sadism

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Introduction

In most human communities, romantic relationships involve emotional, cognitive, and sexual attachment between two people. This dyad relationship is based on the principle of 'exclusivity,' which ensures the stability of the relationship itself and the personal development of each partner and their offspring (Brewer & Abell, 2015). Thus, including a 'third person' signifies a loss of exclusivity and is regarded as a propensity for cheating, adultery, or infidelity in romantic relationships (Fincham, & May, 2017). Adultery is a sexual and/or emotional relationship with such a third person, achieved through direct contact or indirectly through electronic media (SMS, chatting, etc.; Zare, 2011). Although it does not necessarily lead to an official separation or a break-up, it certainly causes lasting effective consequences on the deceived partner and the offspring (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004). Cheating, as an experience of personal betrayal, can give rise to intense feelings of negative affect, mistrust, and disappointment, but also anger, rage, and jealousy, which can result in a mental disorder (Shackelford, Le Blanc, & Drass, 2000; 2005), murder, or suicide.

The paradox of the phenomenon of cheating is reflected in the tendency for people to strive for monogamous communities as well as outside connections, despite knowing that by doing so, they are hurting their partner. The apparent social hypocrisy, expressed as a mismatch between people's attitudes towards cheating and actual behaviour in relationships, has been confirmed by many studies. For example, 90% of citizens in America believe that cheating is unacceptable, 95% expect fidelity from their partner, and 65% define infidelity as immoral, while 20-25% of marriages end in divorce each year due to infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017). Also, it has been determined that those who are prone to cheating often repeat this behaviour (Brewer, & Abell, 2015). Studies (Thompson, & O'Sullivan, 2016) show that there are different motives for cheating, depending on gender: women (15.5% have cheated at least once) express, for example, dissatisfaction in their relationships and securing social status, while men indicate seeking sensation and stress reduction (23.4% have cheated at least once). Regardless of the motive, a common characteristic of cheating is egocentrism and a lack of respect

and empathy for the other person - ruthlessness, often an emotional detachment from guilt (Smith, 2006). If we keep in mind that the antagonistic structure of personality (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, or the dark triad; Paulhus, & Williams, 2002) implies socially aversive, heartless, egocentric, manipulative, and selfish behaviour, it is understandable that individual differences in propensity to cheat are in connection with the characteristics of this personality structure.

Research has shown that a high score on the dark triad is a positive predictor of a propensity to cheat – to commit deception and abuse of partner trust (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones, & Paulhus, 2017). Subclinical psychopathy, as the core of heartlessness, provides a motive for cheating that implies a 'nothing personal' attitude and promiscuity in the composition of impulsivity as a conative style. (Factor 2 of psychopathy; Hare, 1991; Jonason, Lee, & Buss, 2010). High narcissism implies changing one's partner in order to maintain a high image of oneself, seeking risky sensations, and providing a motive for cheating through 'privileged law' (Paulhus, 2010).

However, Machiavellianism attracts the special attention of researchers in the field of research of the nomological network of cheating. Namely, unlike the other two features of the dark triad, Machiavellianism has never been a clinical category and is often perceived as socially acceptable or even desirable behaviour. Christie, & Geis (1970; 2013) define Machiavellianism as a heterogeneous personality trait that implies a negative view of human nature, which justifies the use of negative interpersonal tactics. Unlike psychopaths, Machiavellians do not commit cheating impulsively, and unlike narcissists, they avoid seeking sensation and thus the risk of being 'caught' (Jones, & Paulhus, 2009). The absence of effect makes them even more malicious-reckless. The gratification they gain by engaging in cheating is in line with their exploitative nature, which holds that other people are only a means to an end (Brewer, & Abell, 2015), or that 'the end justifies the means.' Meston, & Buss (2007) suggest that manipulateness is a significant predictor of unfaithful behaviour. Women with elevated Machiavellianism may remain in a romantic relationship despite the cheating, but they are also more likely to engage in infidelity than men with equally expressed Machiavellianism (Jones, & Paulhus, 2010). Thus, Machiavellian moti-

ves for cheating are expected to be related to calculation and manipulation, which brings at least two levels of gratification: the immediate level is physical (emotional) pleasure, while at the indirect level, yet also essential here, is the confirmation of one's skill and superiority (cognitive-emotional).

'Calculated fraud,' with the finding that infidelity is a continuous behaviour (Brewer, & Abell, 2015), speaks of the recklessness of adultery. Recklessness is partly a Machiavellian trait because it is associated with the absence of affect towards others; that is, the affect is turned exclusively towards oneself. However, it is also a willingness to inflict suffering on other people in order to achieve personal satisfaction, which is defined as sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). Research unequivocally shows that people cheat despite hurting their partner, though this is sometimes their goal. Unlike clinical sadism, subclinical (every day) sadism (Buckels, 2018) is a personality trait that we express on a daily basis when we camouflage undesirable behaviors, attitudes, and emotions with appropriate rationalizations such as 'doing evil in the name of good.' It is directly or indirectly recognized through the predominance of a contradictory or paradoxical affective response: directly – when we rejoice in someone else's misfortune, which is known as dissonant empathy (for example, we are glad when someone receives a 'deserved punishment'); indirectly – when we enjoy watching scenes in which someone is hurt or humiliated (scenes of violence in movies and boxing matches, or human humiliation in reality shows). Research has shown that subclinical sadism is significantly associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Dinić, Sadiković, & Wertag, 2020) and today is considered part of the dark constellation of traits (dark tetrad).

To the author's knowledge, the connection between Machiavellianism, subclinical sadism, and a tendency towards cheating has not been researched so far. The aim of our study was to determine whether Machiavellianism and subclinical sadism are significant predictors of adultery. In this way, we examined the possible twofold nature of the motivation for adultery. First, whether the tendency towards adultery is determined by the Machiavellian, antagonistic character, so that infidelity seems to be planned out from self-interest. This type of infidelity is affectively focused exclusively on the perpetrator, where his/her pleasure is independent of how others feel (despite others' suffering).

Thus, this type of infidelity is defined as a “nothing personal” behavior. Secondly, whether and how much adultery is ‘very personally’ (affectively) motivated because it seems primary to enjoy another person’s suffering (not in spite of, but precisely because of). We also investigated whether there are statistically significant gender differences according to the characteristics of Machiavellianism, subclinical sadism, and the propensity to commit adultery. Our research examined whether:

H1) There is a statistically significant association between Machiavellianism, subclinical sadism, and the propensity to cheat;

H2) There are statistically significant gender differences according to all measured variables.

2. Method

2.1. *Study of participants*

In Novi Sad and Apatin, a total of 159 participants, aged 18 to 53 ($M = 24.99$, $SD = 7.94$) were tested, of which 111 were women and 48 men. Data were collected partly online (72 participants), using social media, and partly employing paper and pencil surveys (87 students of the Faculty of Law and Business Studies Dr Lazar Vrkić from Novi Sad). The research was conducted in the period from May to July 2020, in compliance with the standard test procedure.

2.2. *Instruments*

The ITIS or Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale (Jones, Olderbak, & Figueredo, 2011), which was translated from English into Serbian for research purposes, was used to measure the propensity to commit adultery. The scale consisted of 7 items, the answers to which were indicated by participants according to the 5-point Likert scale. The questions were aimed at assessed infidelity in past, present, and future romantic relationships.

To measure the trait of Machiavellianism, an abbreviated form of the Five-Factor Machiavellianism Inventory - FFMI 52 (Five-Factor

Machiavellianism Inventory; Collison, Visas, Miller, & Lynam, 2018) was used, and for research purposes, it was translated from English into Serbian. It consisted of 52 items, the answers to which were indicated by participants according to the 5-point Likert scale. The overall purpose of the questionnaire was to measure the expression of Machiavellianism and the characteristics of Machiavellianism in three dimensions: antagonism, planning, and instrumentality.

Subclinical or everyday sadism was measured by the SSIS or Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011), which was translated from English into Serbian for research purposes. It consisted of 10 items, the answers to which were indicated by participants according to the 5-point Likert scale. Indirect and direct sadism were measured using the VAEST Variety of Sadistic Tendencies (Paulhus, & Jones, 2015), which was translated from English into Serbian for research purposes. It includes 16 items, of which 8 items measure direct sadism and 8 items indirect sadism.

2.3. Statistical processing

For the data processing process, the statistical package SPSS20.0 was used. The methods used for data analysis are descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson's bivariate correlation method, multiple regression analysis, and the student's t-test for independent samples. The reliability of the applied questionnaires was measured by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliability of the questionnaires

All the applied questionnaires exhibited satisfactory reliability, except for the Scale of Everyday Sadism, Indirect Sadism, and the subscale of Machiavellianism Planning (which has the smallest number of items), whose reliability was questionable.

According to the descriptive statistics, respondents rated direct sadism as the least indicated descriptor. On the other hand, they indicated seeing and presenting themselves as enterprising people and people prone to planning. In total, the respondents' results showed a below average tendency to cheating in romantic relationships and a moderate level of Machiavellianism.

Correlation analysis showed that all three variables, measured by the total score, were statistically significantly positively related, with Machiavellianism having a stronger association with adultery than subclinical sadism. The Machiavellian trait of antagonism had the most significant degree of association with adultery and all types of subclinical sadism. Indirect sadism demonstrated no significant association with cheating, while planning was negatively associated with both adultery and subclinical sadism. The instrumentality of Machiavellianism was associated only with adultery and indirect sadism (Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliability of questionnaires

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	α	AS	SD
1. Cheating									.75	1.89	.76
2. Sadism	.18*								.80	1.59	.44
3. Everyday	.18*	.28**							.61	1.53	.46
4. Direct	.20*	.17*	.71**						.78	1.39	.52
5. Indirect	.07	.28**	.52**	.40**					.63	1.98	.66
6. Machiavellianism	.28**	.29**	.28**	.17*	.28**				.84	3.12	.35
7. Antagonism	.33**	.51**	.54**	.44**	.30**	.64**			.79	2.64	.56
8. Instrumentality	.19*	.08	.04	-.04	.22**	.83**	.18*		.82	4.23	.64
9. Planning	-.17*	-.22**	-.22**	-.19*	-.14	.21**	-.24**	.13	.50	3.44	.59

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

3.2. Multiple regression analysis

The regression analysis yielded a statistically significant model that explained about 16% of the variance of the criterion variable ($R=0.39$; $R^2=0.16$; $F=4.646$; $p=.001$), with significant predictors of adultery being only the features of Machiavellianism, antagonism, and, to a lesser extent, instrumentality. As seen in Table 2, no feature of sub-clinical sadism was found to exhibit a partial effect on changes in the criterion variable.

Table 2 Individual contributions of the cheating predictor

		T	P
Everyday sadism	-.039	-.322	.748
Direct sadism	.132	1.224	.223
Indirect sadism	-.096	-1.055	.293
Antagonism	.255	2.746	.007
Instrumentality	.190	2.355	.020
Planning	-.130	-1.639	.103

3.3. Gender differences

Men scored higher on all the measured traits except for planning, the propensity to cheat, and direct sadism. Men exhibited being statistically significantly more Machiavellian, characterized by the trait of instrumentality; they were also determined to have pronounced traits of indirect and everyday sadism. Women were statistically more characterized by Machiavellian planning (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of gender differences according to the measured variables and the student's t-test

		AS	SD	T	Df	P
Cheating	Men	12.83	5.14	-.58	157	.560
	Women	13.37	5.42			
Sadism	Men	47.15	10.23	4.24	157	.001
	Women	39.13	11.26			
Everyday S	Men	150.2	3.95	2.65	157	.009
	Women	13.17	4.07			
Direct S	Men	14,73	4.70	1.25	157	.212
	Women	13.61	5.34			
Indirect S	Men	17.40	3.87	7.38	157	.001
	Women	12.34	4.01			
Machiavellianism	Men	167.48	15.55	2.32	157	.022
	Women	160.23	19.13			
Antagonism	Men	52.65	8.49	1,94	157	.054
	Women	49.14	11.23			
Instrumentality	Men	88.50	10.97	2.51	157	.013
	Women	83.05	13.16			
Planning	Men	26.30	4.44	-2.15	157	.033
	Women	28.04	4.74			

4. Discussion

Despite the possibility for cheating in romantic relationships to have long-term personal and family negative consequences, and in spite of it implying a declarative reaction of social disapproval, research shows that this behaviour is consistently exhibited, as well as that it is increasing in frequency (Brewer, & Abell, 2015). According to available data, cheating is encouraged by various social triggers, which build on specific determined personality structures: low conscientiousness, low pleasure, and high extraversion (Schmitt, & Shackelford, 2008); for women also high neuroticism (Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007); as

well as traits of socially aversive character - narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. However, the field of the nomological network of predictors of cheating is still insufficiently examined. The aim of our work was to determine whether and to what extent the tendency towards adultery could be attributed to the action of Machiavellian personality traits, i.e., dissonant affect, which is the main determinant of subclinical sadism. The main finding of this research is that in our respondents who indicated being prone to adultery, both of the measured characteristics were expressed, but that adultery was predicted by Machiavellian antagonism, rather than subclinical sadism. According to our results, both sexes were determined to cheat/not cheat on their partners to the same extent.

4.1. *Machiavellianism and cheating*

Machiavellianism positively predicted the tendency towards cheating, although not all Machiavellian features exhibited the same predictive significance, nor the direction of prediction. The feature of antagonism was seen to play a particularly important role, predicting the tendency to deception and subclinical sadism in all its forms. Therefore, in the context of deception, our respondents did not indicate being guided by some long-term goal or benefit they might achieve through infidelity, but by a general willingness to subordinate other people to their own pleasure. This is in line with the paradigm that the ability to deceive, deceive, lie, and conceal is part of a general manipulative interpersonal style (Christie, & Geis, 1970; 2013), which has the character of 'nothing personal.' Instrumentality was shown to further stimulate deception, likely because deception is used as part of a trade in search of a desired goal. Comfort in such behaviour is provided by the conative assembly (Jones, 2010). In contrast, Machiavellian planning (calculation) has been shown to be a protective factor of fidelity in romantic relationships. However, this finding should be considered with caution, as reliability of the Planning subscale was determined as questionable in our sample. It is possible that one of the reasons for the low reliability was the relatively small number of items compared to other FFMI subscales. However, having in mind that FFMI as a whole has high reliability,

we can say that pronounced planning was seen as the only feature that significantly distinguished women from men. In that sense, the absence of long-term calculations was found to be a predictor of cheating, indicating that the cheating is related to the situational context, so it takes place impulsively, without much thought. That is, if there is a pronounced Machiavellian tendency towards planning, then this account speaks in favor of the thesis that more would be lost than gained by cheating on a partner ('cheating is not worth it'). This finding is inconsistent with previous ones, which have shown that women are more prone to deception to a much greater extent as Machiavellians (Jones, & Paulhus, 2010). This could be explained by the application of the various instruments for measuring Machiavellianism, the gender structure of the sample, and some cultural specifics, but also the questionable reliability of this subscale in our study.

4.2. *Subclinical sadism and deception*

Subclinical sadism, like all its features, except indirect sadism, was seen to be positively associated with adultery. However, this finding should also be considered with caution, for three reasons. First, the obtained correlations explained the relatively low percentages of common variance. Secondly, after partialization, the predictor effect of the traits of sadism was lost, which indicates that the connection with adultery was mediated by a common variance with the traits of Machiavellianism. This means that the predictive power of subclinical sadism was actually defined by the antagonistic nature of Machiavellianism. Third, the scales of indirect and everyday subclinical sadism were also seen to have questionable reliability. In relation to the initial question (Why do people cheat on their partners despite knowing that it will hurt them?) the answer could be seen relatively optimistically: it seems that it is not because they enjoy the pain they inflict, but because it is part of their conative, Machiavellian structure. Still, the ruthlessness of infidelity is unquestionable, and it implies not only engaged affective resources (absence of adequate and contradictory affectivity), but also activity, because only indirect (vicarious) sadism, which does not imply direct

participation of a person, demonstrated a significant connection with cheating. The absence of the connection between vicarious sadism and planning, displaying a significant connection with other Machiavellian features, confirms the finding that the nature of this activity is part of the general Machiavellian style and can have an instrumental character.

As previously mentioned, subclinical sadism, together with Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy, is part of the dark tetrad, which explains the connection between Machiavellianism (especially antagonism) and the characteristics of sadism in this paper. Thus, the tendency towards adultery is part of the conative style of antagonistic character, so the act of adultery is 'nothing personal.' This is in line with earlier findings that the propensity to commit adultery is a consistent behaviour, or, as the colloquial phrase goes, "once an adulterer is always an adulterer."

In the available literature, there are no findings linking subclinical sadism and deception, but the results of these studies have shown that subclinical sadism is significantly associated with sexual dominance, domestic violence, and the enjoyment of injuring partners during sex, along with internet "trolling" ("trolling" - writing disturbing messages; Buckels, Trapnell, Andjelovic, & Paulhus, 2019). Therefore, it is quite possible that this factor of cheating can result in the most serious outcomes.

4.3. *Gender differences*

Significant gender differences were found according to almost all measured characteristics, except in relation to adultery and direct sadism. Previous research on gender differences in cheating has not yielded consistent findings. While some authors argue that men and women are equally prone to cheating (Kellum, 2018), others state that infidelity is a stronger trait in men (Allen, & Baucom, 2004). A study reviewing research on infidelity (Zare, 2011) reported that at the age of 40, in the middle of the last century, 50% of married men committed adultery and 25% of married women, while 30 years later 60% of married men committed adultery and 50% of married women. However, one of

the problems pointed out by research on variables in the field of sexuality is the tendency to give socially desirable answers. If we have in mind the previously described hypocrisy of attitudes about infidelity in romantic relationships, then this information about our equal inclinations should be taken with a grain of salt. In favor of this in this study is that gender differences were found in almost all other variables, except for direct sadism, which also implies self-expression regarding explicit sadistic nature.

Looking at it this way, we would say that men define their angle of view on cheating through Machiavellianism, which is part of an aversive character, or through dissonant affect (subclinical sadism), which can also be of the vicarious type. The more pronounced sadism indicated in men than in women indicates a greater degree of ruthlessness and a less pronounced possibility of feelings of guilt, but also a higher probability of adultery to be committed "very personally." Women, as we said earlier, were shown to be more prone to calculations that make them loyal to their partner: they seem to cheat situationally. The exhibited significantly lower capacity for subclinical sadism compared to men would indicate the possibility of subsequent feelings of guilt. Earlier researchers have explained subclinical sadism as a primary feature of the male gender in characteristic reproductive strategies (Buss, & Shackelford, 1997), but perhaps we could talk more about significant gender differences (in favor of women) identified for the trait Emotionality, which connotes traits of parental altruism, and Neuroticism (Whisman et al., 2007).

In general, adultery in romantic relationships seems to be part of the general set of antagonistic characters of adulterers. As such, it is continuous, not personally directed ('nothing personal'), and the combination of Machiavellianism and subclinical sadism explains the recklessness of the cheating. The results indicate the very complex nature of this problem, which should be further investigated, especially because it can have a high-risk effect in the field of antisocial behaviour (propensity to domestic violence, homicide) and mental health.

4.4. *Limitations of the study*

The first type of limitation is found in the structure of the sample, through its gender inequality and the application of self-expression methods. The second type of restriction is related to the inconsistency of the test conditions: given the pandemic situation, some respondents filled out questionnaires online, and some using the standard paper-pencil method. The third type of restriction refers to a fundamental weakness of research on the phenomenon of adultery; the high probability of respondents to give socially desirable answers. Finally, the low reliability of the subscales of sadism (Indirect and Everyday) and especially the subscales of Machiavellian Planning, significantly limit the possibility of generalizing data. However, we believe that despite these limitations, this study has highlighted some very important aspects of the complex phenomenon of infidelity in romantic relationships, which should be further explored, especially given the impact of adultery on various forms of aberrant behaviour: both in the domain of violent behaviour and in the domain of the general mental health of people.

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