The Machiavellian Organization: A Multilevel Model to Understand Decision Making in Organizations

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Abstract

We introduce a three-phase model of decision-making as examined through a Machiavellian lens. Distinct from previous research, we broaden our research premise from Machiavellianism exhibited by an individual to Machiavellianism at the organizational level. We examine this type of organization beginning with an emphasis on organizational values and practices, which we define as climate emergence. After establishing the process of climate emergence, we examine employee sensemaking within a Machiavellian climate by drawing on Rest's (1986) ethical decision-making model. Our research culminates with an exploration of resultant employee behaviors while emphasizing the moderating role of dispositional Machiavellianism. We conclude with a discussion centered on how this perspective fits within recent research and its impact on organizational practices.

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All too often, headlines announce corporate scandals, fraudulent accounting practices, and accusations of sexual misconduct within organizational settings. Questionable business practices have led to claims of deception (Lantos, 1999), manipulation (Yi et al., 2019), and unethical behavior (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2017). These behaviors drain organizational resources and undermine industry reputation (e.g., Reuber & Fischer, 2010). Despite the significant pushback against these types of behaviors in the form of social norms and legal sanctions, immoral behavior persists in the corporate world. As such, a deeper understanding of immoral organizational practices, along with subsequent downstream effects, has been the focus of many research investigations (e.g., Garrett et al., 1989; Moore & Gino, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2007).

In line with the Anna Karenina principle (Tolstoy, 1877; see also Diamond, 1997), moral individuals, teams, and organizations are all moral in a relatively homogeneous fashion; however, immoral individuals, teams, and organizations are immoral in their own unique way, including behavior such as bigotry, gaslighting, abusive supervision, ostracism, dishonesty, manipulation, counterproductive work behaviors (CWB), and unethical acts. In research circles, scholars have discussed a subset of dispositional traits that precede these antisocial behaviors. One set of these dispositional traits is known as the "dark triad" and is composed of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (O'Boyle et al., 2013). Machiavellianism is posited to consist of three sub-dimensions: manipulation, cynical view of humanity, and an "ends justify the means" mentality (O'Boyle et al., 2013). Because Machiavellians might engage in any number of antisocial behaviors to achieve their goals, we unpack the effects of a Machiavellian

agenda at an organizational level; that is, we propose a new construct of Machiavellian climate. Following past definitions of climate (Schneider et al., 2013), we define a Machiavellian climate as the shared perception that gaining and using power dictates what is moral. There are several theoretical advantages to be realized in forwarding the notion of a Machiavellian climate, which we articulate below.

First, our model broadens the understanding of multilevel decision-making. For years, scholars have discussed the interrelated role of situations and dispositions in influencing actors' behaviors (House et al., 1996; Sackett et al., 2017). Although prior organizational research has cast the ideas of Machiavellianism at the individual level of analysis (O'Boyle et al., 2013; Jonason & Tost, 2010), we propose that the ideology of Machiavellianism transcends this micro-level analysis and accurately represents a "Machiavellian situation." Importantly, while a Machiavellian climate and trait Machiavellianism are grounded by the same philosophical ideas, our focus centers on how the moral ideology proposed by Machiavelli emerges as a climate. By doing so, we balance the climate literature that has predominantly focused on more positive climates (e.g., safety, procedural justice, service, diversity, active learning, forgiveness, corporate volunteering, communication). Although some empirical research has explored negative climates (Mawritz et al., 2014; Paulin & Griffin, 2017), our conceptual work is unique in pairing a negative climate to a specific moral paradigm, which explains its emergence as opposed to focusing on its characteristics or outcomes.

Next, our model takes a broader approach towards the ideas presented by Machiavelli by incorporating both negative and positive consequences of a Machiavellian climate. Indeed, a model fails to be interesting (Davis, 1971) and is likely oversimplified when said model suggests that an undesirable antecedent predicts undesirable outcomes and is mediated and moderated by

undesirable constructs. To date, the link between the ideas proposed by Machiavelli and unethical behavior is established to the point where they almost appear interchangeable (Jones & Mueller, in press). However, in the same way that impression management is distinct from fabrication (Swider et al., 2011) and that leadership behaviors can be distinguished from leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), we believe that a Machiavellian climate remains distinct from unethical behavior. We seek to describe an alternate moral paradigm, or a specific view of what constitutes "right" or "wrong," where the scale of morality is shifted towards power attainment and maintenance. Therefore, while we theorize that unethical behavior is more likely to occur in a Machiavellian climate, it is an outcome, not a defining characteristic of this climate. Accordingly, our model conceptually clarifies a Machiavellian climate's antecedents, mediating links, and underlying mechanisms.

Building from this established conceptual framework, the remainder of our manuscript is structured as follows. We contextualize a Machiavellian climate by reviewing the construct of organizational climate and the philosophical roots of Machiavellianism. We then define a Machiavellian climate and distinguish this from other climate types. Once distinguished, we theorize how a Machiavellian climate emerges with a specific focus on core values and organizational practices. Using a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 2005) and drawing on Rest's (1986) model of ethical decision making, we elaborate on how a Machiavellian climate can influence employees throughout decision-making processes that involve moral issues. Importantly, we highlight how the trait Machiavellianism moderates the impact of a Machiavellian climate on the decision-making process at the individual level of analysis. Penultimately, we discuss the impact a Machiavellian climate has on employee ethical and workplace mistreatment behaviors while also emphasizing that a Machiavellian climate is likely

to foster visible, short-term successes. We conclude by discussing the implications of our theorizing and directions for future research.

Contextualizing a Machiavellian Climate

In order to contextualize our arguments, we dedicate this section to overviewing the construct of organizational climate and highlighting how organizational climate differs from culture. Subsequently, we unpack the philosophical roots of Machiavellianism as the backdrop for our definition of a Machiavellian climate.

Organizational Climate

We echo previous work in defining organizational climate as "the shared perceptions of and the meaning attached to the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience and the behaviors they observe getting rewarded and that are supported and expected" (Schneider et al., 2013, p. 362). Popular organizational climates include safety (Zohar, 1980), service (Schneider et al., 2005), and procedural justice climate (Naumann & Bennett, 2000). Climate is related, though conceptually distinct, from culture. Culture defines the manner in which employees are expected to act and feel within the organization, as well as defining the basic values and beliefs of the organization (Schneider et al., 2013). Climate conceptually communicates with culture as it defines the way employees make sense of culture and decide what is proper (Ostroff et al., 2003). Culture refers to the values expressed to a new hire on their first day of the job, whereas climate is something they slowly begin to recognize as they see what is rewarded, supported, and expected (Schneider et al., 2013).

Philosophical Roots of Machiavellianism

Drawing its name from Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian writer, philosopher, and politician who lived through the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th Century, Machiavellianism

carries implications across various types of literature. In his treatise *The Prince*, Machiavelli

challenged widespread political and ethical assumptions by emphasizing a "political realism"

seen as detached from ethics or virtue. Infamous maxims such as "it is better to be feared than

loved" reflect the cold, calculated, even shrewd reputation "Machiavellian" ideas are seen to

embody. However, labeling Machiavellianism as amoral misses the central premise of his

writings and theory. While there are numerous debates on the original intention of Machiavelli

(Parkinson, 1955), we argue that, at the core, the ideological construct of Machiavellianism

refers to gaining control and status (Dahling et al., 2009), i.e., power, as the ultimate aim with

gaining, maintaining, and using that power as the primary moral focus[1].

Although countercultural to the thinking of the day, using the pursuit of power as the

ultimate metric of right and wrong cannot be considered amoral, specifically because anything

dealing with the definition and delineation of right vs. wrong is, by definition, morality. So

instead, Machiavellianism challenges Judeo-Christian moral ideals such as integrity, honor, and

decency (Mele & Fontrodona, 2017), asserting that what is genuinely moral or right is the

acquisition and leverage of power. Rather than lying, cheating, or stealing as the basis of

immorality (Kilduff et al., 2016), Machiavellianism condemns the loss of or failure to use power

as true immortality since power is the ultimate aim. Thus, acquiring and using power defines

morality, which leaves alter-morality principles such as honesty, equity, positive public image,

and fair treatment as tools at the disposal of those in power. These principles can be manipulated

to accomplish the aims of the individual. In the words of Machiavelli (1513/2008), "a prudent

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[1] It is important to note the conceptual divergence between "Machiavellianism" within psychology and "Machiavellianism" within political theory or philosophy. For the purposes of this research, both definitions maintain relevance and are largely comparably useful. In nuanced instances where the two definitions differ, we favor philosophical Machiavellianism over psychological as it is more equipped to discuss Machiavellianism at a broader level whereas the psychological construct is better tailored to the micro-level of analysis.

ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist" (p. 64).

An excellent example of this principle in action is the many movies (e.g., Hunger Games), television shows (e.g., Survivor), school games (e.g., King of the Hill), and family games (e.g., One Night Werewolf) that leverage the tenets of Machiavellianism. In these instances, values are compartmentalized, and all members enter the scene knowing "power is king." Manipulation to achieve these ends is entirely acceptable—actors may lie, cheat, form alliances, betray social pacts, tell the truth, or do anything necessary to realize success. These examples beautifully exemplify Machiavellian morality primarily due to the obvious advantage gained by strategically telling the truth and helping other players. Judeo-Christian "morality" might be leveraged, but only insofar as it serves the ultimate end of winning the game. A player might initially honor alliances in such games, not because it is inherently good to be true, but because it is a prudent strategy to maintain one's power. Once such honorable actions cease to serve this end, the game strategy suggests betrayal as a "good" move. These same patterns emerge in the workplace. An individual may refrain from talking poorly about a boss, not necessarily motivated out of kindness, rather out of fear that the boss might find out. An employee in this situation is primarily motivated through fear of what might hinder their own advancement or job security rather than a motivation of the "rightness" or "wrongness" of gossip or covert criticism. Similarly, employee in-groups might fluctuate and evolve as people manipulate and attempt to ascend the structural ladder.

Although Machiavellian morality goes against the grain of what we typically consider moral, a quick search reveals more than enough examples to reflect this prevalence within our society. FIFA's brusque dismal of global reprimands and doubled-down support of Sebb Blatter

(Petriglieri, 2015) reflect this narrative that power is the ultimate aim. Wells Fargo's account

fraud scandal highlights not only the overarching focus on power as the moral compass but the

shrewd leverage of honesty, remorse, and justice (Zoltners et al., 2016) as tools to gain and use

that power. Meta-analyses on the nomological network of these dark constructs reveal that

Machiavellianism at the individual level of analysis is, unsurprisingly, related to narcissism and

psychopathy, as well as counterproductive behavior (Forsyth et al., 2012). Yet, at the

organizational level of analysis, the relationship of a climate to other constructs is likely more

nuanced.

Complexly, the moral paradigm that power dictates right and wrong can also result in

non-negative outcomes. For example, many leaders in history, i.e., the Robber Barons, adopted

ruthless tactics in the acquisition of power and prestige, but they also ushered in a world of steel,

oil, and banking that triggered unprecedented growth and prosperity across the country

(Josephson, 1934). Indeed, for the statement "the ends justify the means" to hold weight, there

must be an "end" that is perceived as worthy of acquisition. If a person wishes to become the

head of the sales department, then their efforts (e.g., staying late to make more sales) will also

benefit the team (e.g., team bonus) and the company (e.g., increased revenue). Thus, it is

necessary to highlight that a climate of Machiavellianism places the acquisition of power as the

centerpiece of morality and is agnostic to adjoining actions so long as they can increase status

and control.

A Machiavellian Climate

Recall we define a Machiavellian climate as the shared perception that gaining and using

power dictates what is moral (Schneider et al., 2013). This definition of climate does not

necessarily imply that every individual in the organization scores high in trait Machiavellianism

or eventually will convert into a person who scores higher in Machiavellianism. Instead, this denotes that people in the organization believe that pursuing power by whatever means necessary is "what is done around here." In terms of scope (Suddaby, 2010), a Machiavellian climate is likely to emerge in conditions with high levels of uncertainty or where there exist informal power structures. In contrast, a Machiavellian climate is unlikely to manifest itself in environments that champion affiliative values (e.g., gratitude, compassion, empathy, forgiveness) or those that subscribe to other moral paradigms.

Furthermore, it is fruitful to establish its "historical lineage" in order to achieve construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010). Related to a Machiavellian climate is prior research on ethical climate (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Ethical climate suggests three types of climates: egoism, benevolence, and principle (Victor & Cullen, 1988). A principle climate is based on adherence to rules, laws, and professional codes, a benevolence climate is based on caring for and concern toward others, and an egoism climate is based on self-interest and company profit (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Concerning benevolence and principle, a Machiavellian climate may encourage principle or benevolence in so far as it facilitates power. For example, acting benevolently can increase an individual's status (Flynn et al., 2006), and following professional codes can increase organizational legitimacy (Rao, 1994). However, ethical climate argues that principle and benevolence should dictate how organizations and employees decide, whereas a Machiavellian climate sees benevolence and principle as means rather than what should guide action. Egoism from the ethical climate framework bears the most semblance to a Machiavellian climate but differs due to its focus on morality. Egoism focuses on the individual, whereas Machiavellian climate focuses on power. A Machiavellian climate encourages actions that facilitate power acquisition and not always what is in the best interest of the individuals themselves, whereas an

egoism climate encourages "self-interest, first and foremost" (Wimbush & Shepard, 1994, p. 639). The moral guide of a Machiavellian climate is power, while the focus of an egoistic climate is self-interest.

Phase I: Climate Emergence

With a suitable conceptualization of Machiavellian climate in place, we now examine the origins and emergence of Machiavellian climates and focus on how organizational values and practices form a Machiavellian climate. Our research model is shown in Figure 1. In line with past research (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Fehr et al., 2017; Ostroff et al., 2003), we argue that climate emerges as organizational practices are formed based on commonly held values. As seen in Figure 1, organizational practices, in turn, serve as an intervening state between the influence of organizational values and organizational climate. In particular, we posit that autonomy and aggrandizement are core values that subsequently lead to increased discretion in standard enforcement and a bottom-line mentality, respectively.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Autonomy

A popular trend in business circles is to empower workers by adopting a "no rules" mentality (Hastings & Meyer, 2020), and it is a generally held assumption, both in practice and in research, that autonomy is a powerful motivator (Pink, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast to Weber's (1968) bureaucratic typology, a company that embraces autonomy will likely place more focus on outcomes than the underlying mechanics of the work process. Since behaviors to gain power can violate social norms, a codified and rigid governance structure is unlikely to endorse actions aligned with a Machiavellian climate. However, a broader bandwidth of "acceptable" behavior empowers individuals, teams, and leaders to promote a Machiavellian

climate. As individuals, teams, and leaders are given more autonomy, this creates space for more significant variation in behavior.

If organizations value autonomy, then it is probable that they will allow actors at different levels in the hierarchy to have discretion in their decision-making. Typically, this is a codified practice that is documented. For example, in the legal system, the punishment for running a red light in the United States could vary from a fine of $50 to $500, and discretion is given to the judge regarding the fine amount that should be imposed. A salaried position for an entry-level software engineer at a company may range from $75,000 to $125,000. Punishment for stealing company office supplies could vary from a simple reprimand to a formal legal suit, again, depending on the leader's discretion. Each of these instances accommodates discretion to take situational factors into account. In other contexts, however, the range may be more dramatic. Consider, for example, a military commanding officer who wields an extreme amount of discretionary power in rewarding or punishing behavior. For example, this leader may randomly punish one soldier for being late by requiring that he or she run 15 miles and may not punish another soldier who violated the same punctuality expectation. A favorite soldier may receive favors, such as lining up first in the mess hall or receiving the best equipment, and a disliked soldier may constantly be assigned night duty. In these instances, the commanding officer may be within the provisions set forth by the military unit and has technically not violated any organizational rules. Thus, given the broad range of discretion that the commanding officer possesses, the collective group of soldiers will pay less attention to the "formal rules" but will pay much more attention to their commanding officer, who wields the ability to punish and reward.

This organizational practice gives rise to informal power structures because there are gaps in the formal infrastructure. For example, in theorizing the emergence of workplace vigilantes, DeCelles and Aquino (2020) argue that a critical antecedent of unauthorized punishment is weak social control mechanisms. When the governance structure is weak, as is the case with organizations that implement policies that allow for a broad range of discretionary decisions, managers are endowed with immense power. Actors must then seek to acquire power to satisfy their best interests (i.e., increasing rewards and decreasing punishments). Ergo, as organizations institutionalize autonomy via managerial discretion, this facilitates the pursuit of power via whatever means necessary.

Proposition 1: The core value of autonomy will result in organizational practices of discretion, which will enable a Machiavellian climate to emerge.

Aggrandizement

The core value of aggrandizement can be seen in political campaigns, military units, professional and collegiate sports teams, and technology companies. Aggrandizement naturally requires some object or idea (e.g., monetary gains, influence) worthy of being placed on a pedestal. Glory is typically not subjective (e.g., multiple outcomes are not equally worthy of celebration) or broadly distributed (e.g., there is only a single "first place"). Thus, social environments will naturally produce a handful, or only one, visible outcome worthy of aggrandizement. Placing specific outcomes on a pedestal and largely ignoring the process creates an ideal environment for a Machiavellian climate to emerge because perceived power is more likely centralized into behavior that approximates the "ends" and largely ignores the "means."

A social environment that embraces aggrandizement and applauds glory via artifacts (e.g., trophies), statuses (e.g., 5-star general), monetary rewards (e.g., bonuses), or other means

highlights the desirability of outward achievements. Although showcasing positive behavior is common to most organizations (e.g., an employee of the month), some organizations may allocate enormous rewards (e.g., $100K end-of-year bonus). At the organizational level, the most natural means of increasing status and power is via the bottom line. With increased discretionary funds, a company can achieve nearly every market advantage via hostile takeovers, hiring away the best talent, or upgrading assets. Thus, the core value of aggrandizement is likely to lead organizations to adopt practices that improve the bottom line via decreasing costs or increasing revenue. For example, a company may tie bonuses to the number of sales a team made or promote managers of cost-centers (e.g., IT department) with the lowest costs. Once members of the organization recognize that improving the bottom-line is rewarded via increased power (e.g., bonus, recognition, promotion), people will be incentivized to pursue these ends.

Proposition 2: The core value of aggrandizement will result in the organizational practice of bottom-line metrics, enabling a Machiavellian climate to emerge.

Phase II: Employee Sensemaking

Once the Machiavellian climate has emerged, a sensemaking perspective provides further insight into downstream effects. Sensemaking describes how individuals create a collective experience together and can be described as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Based on the sensemaking perspective, when individuals encounter an uncertain external event, they search their environment for social cues to create meaning of the event (Weick, 1995). Therefore, the organizational climate can provide an essential input in the sensemaking process by providing social cues based on organizational norms, leader interactions, and coworkers' actions. In particular, we draw on Rest's (1986) and Jones' (1991) presented ethical decision-making

models to emphasize the effect of Machiavellian climate on the decision-making process in organizations via three primary stages: awareness, judgment, and intention. According to Rest (1986), each step in the moral decision-making process is conceptually distinct from the others. Jones (1991) further emphasizes that "success in one stage does not imply success in any other stage" (p. 368). Thus, an employee can be aware of a moral decision but fail at another stage, highlighting the distinctiveness of each.

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge that there are different paradigms of morality (Sandel, 2011) and that people may favor a different school of thought. Examples of moral paradigms include Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, libertarianism, Christianity's golden-rule principle, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, John Rawls' equality-based morality, John Locke's assumption regarding tacit contracts, and Aristotle's justice, telos, and honor framework (Sandel, 2011). In contrast to culture or climate, these paradigms are conceptually independent of any particular environment or goal and simply represent a potential rubric that individuals can use when assessing what constitutes "right" and "wrong." Indeed, morality is subjective and may vary from person to person (e.g., conscience) or across cultures (e.g., drugs, intellectual property, modesty, bribery). For example, in an fMRI study, Greene et al. (2001) demonstrated that heterogeneous ethical decisions map to different regions of brain activation, such as the amygdala (often associated with emotional processing) or the dorsolateral surfaces of the prefrontal cortex (often related to cognitive processing). Further, evidence also shows that economic students trained to think in terms of utility maximization are more prone to self-interested behavior than other types of students (Frank & Schulze, 1993), indicating that training can alter one's moral paradigm.

Thus, in explicating the three stages below, it is essential to recognize that a person in a Machiavellian climate is likely to embrace a Machiavellian morality at any one of these three stages. Furthermore, suppose a person has adopted an alternative paradigm of morality, such as the categorical imperative (i.e., one should act as if they lived in a world where everyone would make that decision; Kant, 1785). In that case, they will be influenced to abandon this morality or not act upon its central tenets when they are in a Machiavellian climate. Lastly, the Machiavellian climate will primarily influence employees and their behaviors and cognitions while within the organizational environment and may not spill over into other domains.

Awareness

The first stage in a moral decision is the individual's awareness, which "involves an interpretive process wherein the individual recognizes that a moral problem exists in a situation, or that a moral standard or principle is relevant to the circumstances" (Treviño et al., 2006, p. 953). In particular, we argue that a Machiavellian organizational climate will shift employee awareness so that they anchor their behavior to whether or not it is increasing or maintaining power. As previous empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated, many situational factors can moderate this awareness stage, including the time of day (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014), the amount of lighting (Zhong et al., 2010), the presence of moral reminders (Mazar et al., 2008), or the type of decision (Motro et al., 2018). Thus, climate should alter how people view moral decisions.

A Machiavellian climate emphasizes a unique moral paradigm, i.e., gaining and maintaining power, which may limit the broader awareness of the morality of a decision. For example, suppose an employee was asked to misreport inventory items in their accounting statement because a shipment was on its way. In this example, the employee understands those inventory items are linked to how their team contributes to an increased bottom line and that

team bonuses are rewarded accordingly. Because the decision deals with power, the individual is more likely to ignore other moral paradigms (e.g., categorical imperative) and focus on the moral criterion of gaining power. Indeed, they will recognize that this is "just the way things are done." Thus, we posit that a Machiavellian climate shifts how employees become aware of morality in their decision-making by emphasizing the morality of power-seeking.

> *Proposition 3: A Machiavellian climate shifts an employee's awareness of morality in their decision-making to view power-seeking as the most valid moral paradigm.*

Judgment

A subsequent step in Rest's (1986) model is moral judgment, which has been argued to be the most critical element contributing to ethical behavior (Kohlberg, 1981). In this stage, the individual evaluates potential choices and outcomes and distinguishes what constitutes right and wrong. The central tenet of the moral judgment stage is the process by which individuals reference external guidelines, such as codes of conduct, laws, normative structure, or referent others (Treviño, 1986). These external standards serve as points to which actors anchor in their judgment of the situation. As informal power structures take rule-like status, they become influencers who can shift what is perceived as immoral to appear normal and acceptable, as demonstrated by Zimbardo's Stanford Prison study and the infamous Milgram shock experiments (Smith & Haslam, 2017). Overall, a Machiavellian climate provides input to employees' judgments of what constitutes morally justifiable decisions by making them appear as normal, and thus justifiable, behavior. Thus, at this stage, a person who has shifted to a Machiavellian morality will be reinforced, and this person will become further convinced that a Machiavellian morality is appropriate, within the organizational context. Moreover, a person who had previously adopted another moral paradigm, such as the categorical imperative, is likely

to be swayed to switch to a Machiavellian morality as they consider the social cues that suggest their moral reasoning is out of place. Stated formally,

> *Proposition 4: A Machiavellian climate shifts employees' judgment of power-seeking*
>
> *decisions to see them as normal and acceptable.*

Intention

The next step in the ethical decision-making process is establishing moral intent, which constitutes committing to the judgment made in the previous stage. We conceptualize that individuals who have embraced a Machiavellian morality in the previous two steps will intend to seek power via whatever means necessary. However, for those who have navigated the first two steps without embracing the morality of Machiavellianism, such as the employee who embraced the categorical imperative, a Machiavellian climate will continue to exert its influence so that people are less likely to do so as a method of acting upon their intentions to avoid antisocial behavior. In other words, although this person may not have "adopted" the Machiavellian climate, they are less likely to push against social norms and commit to their own "moral" behavior out of fear of retaliation or other social reprimands. It has been said that it is "easier to claim that we will be ethical than to be ethical at the time when other priorities can dominate" (Moore & Gino, 2015, p. 268).

> *Proposition 5: A Machiavellian climate increases an employee's intention to commit to*
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> *power-seeking actions.*

Boundary Conditions of Machiavellian Climates

Although we position a Machiavellian climate at the organizational level of analysis, Machiavellianism has also been conceptualized as a personality trait (e.g., Belschak et al., 2015; Greenbaum et al., 2017). Thus, we posit that the trait Machiavellianism of an employee will

moderate the impact of a Machiavellian climate on an employee's decision-making process. In line with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), which suggests that when situations and traits match their effects are enhanced, we argue that the relationship between a Machiavellian climate and employees decision making will be stronger when an employee is high in trait Machiavellianism. In other words, we anticipate that employees high in trait Machiavellianism will be more prone to accept the moral paradigm of power as the source of morality. Indeed, prior research on climate has found that when the traits of employees match the climate the climate's effect on employee outcomes is strengthened (Babalola et al., 2022). Further, this idea corroborates the "fit" literature, which emphasizes significant interactions when there is alignment between individuals and other environmental characteristics (e.g., supervisor, team, organization; see Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Conversely, the effect of a Machiavellian climate on an employee's decision making process should be weakened for employees lower in trait Machiavellianism. To wit, we argue that high (low) trait Machiavellian will increase (decrease) the likelihood that a Machiavellian climate will influence employee decision-making.

Proposition 6: Trait Machiavellianism of employees moderates the impact of a

Machiavellian climate on employees' decision-making process.

PHASE III: Employee Action

Employee action is the culmination of our model. In particular, we focus on how a Machiavellian climate facilitates both negative (i.e., unethical behavior and workplace mistreatment) and positive (i.e., visible and short-term successes) outcomes. First, we explore how a Machiavellian climate will increase the probability of negative outcomes. With a moral paradigm shift that power dictates right versus wrong, unethical behaviors such as lying, stealing,

or cheating become acceptable as they do not constitute what is moral. Indeed, these can be effective tools to establish and maintain power. Additionally, workplace mistreatment such as bullying, verbal abuse, or harassment can similarly be thought of as effective tools to create power and dependency. For example, Ju et al. (2019) found that abusive supervision increased leaders' sense of power, which increased their own sense of self-efficacy. Building on Mischel's (1977) arguments, situations are especially salient when they are strong and provide signals about what is expected, rewarded, and punished. In line with this rationale, unethical behavior and workplace mistreatment are more likely to be implicitly rewarded or remain unpunished in a Machiavellian climate because the organization places a premium on outcomes and is largely agnostic to the underlying process.

Proposition 7a & 7b: A Machiavellian climate increases an employee's undesirable behaviors in the form of (a) unethical behavior and (b) workplace mistreatment.

The notion of a Machiavellian climate is likely unsettling. However, we suspect that many organizations adopt and utilize norms that promote this type of climate emergence. We are not proponents of the ideas espoused by a Machiavellian climate; however, the focus on power can be very influential for organizations, and although it may have detrimental consequences for ethical behavior, it likely results in beneficial outcomes as well. As organizations focus on power, they can gain influence within their own organization and industry. As they leverage their influence, they are likely able to generate profits for the company. Because a Machiavellian climate is linked with informal power structures, actors will be motivated to produce visible forms of success. Indeed, if a Machiavellian climate is based upon the acquisition of power, visible successes are the currency that enables individuals to rise through the ranks. These visible victories can be easily articulated and often transferred to other contexts.

Additionally, a Machiavellian climate is also likely to encourage short-term successes. In order to invest in long-term success, the organization must be committed to allowing initial failure and working as a team since the person who started a project may not be the same one to finish the project. In contrast, a Machiavellian climate is focused on acquiring power; thus, entrusting future success to another employee is unlikely to happen. In this way, employees will understand that in order to reap the results of their hard work, they will need to accelerate the harvesting timeline.

> *Proposition 8: A Machiavellian climate increases an employee's desirable behaviors in the form of visible, short-term successes.*

Discussion

Within this manuscript, we have forwarded a new construct, namely, a Machiavellian climate and have articulated how this climate emerges, influences employees' decision-making, and impacts workplace behaviors. We have defined a Machiavellian climate as the shared perception that gaining and using power dictates what is moral. In line with our model, a Machiavellian climate is most likely to apply in situations where there is a high level of autonomy and aggrandizement, but other factors, such as uncertainty and intolerance, may also contribute. In terms of its semantic relationship to other constructs (Suddaby, 2010), this climate is similar to other climates in that it impacts people's perceptions of what constitutes normal (Schneider et al., 2013). In line with research in social psychology, it is expected that these perceptions will subsequently impact people's actions (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1963), as we have demonstrated in this manuscript. We now discuss theoretical implications, routes for theoretical integration, and potential agendas for future research.

Theoretical Implications

By casting Machiavellianism at the organizational level, we redefine the boundaries of the "system" in which manipulation occurs. At the heart of social interactions is the concept of exchanges (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Machiavellianism is repugnant at the micro-level because one person's loss becomes another person's gain, and this exchange lacks equity and ultimately is not sustainable. However, at a meso- or macro-level analysis, a team or organization may not experience a net gain or loss from deceptive "power move" behaviors. For example, a salesperson may be manipulated and not receive credit for a sale that he or she worked hard to achieve. However, the sales manager is indifferent to who received credit for the sale so long as the sale occurred. From the manager's perspective, he or she did not experience a loss, nor did the organization. Thus, at the organizational level, this type of self-contained manipulation (e.g., manipulation within the organization as opposed to manipulation between organizations) may be expected and even rewarded if it fosters increased organizational outcomes. We expect this type of shift may also have implications for other antisocial behaviors.

Organizational theory is further forwarded by reiterating that ethics is not a dichotomy between moral and immoral decisions (Sandel, 2011). Indeed, no single moral paradigm can adequately address all situations, and people frequently favor the rationale of different paradigms depending upon the context. For example, as a student on a team project, certain members may adopt a utilitarianism mindset when it comes to deciding how much work to contribute; however, in their personal life, these same students may favor the golden rule of "doing unto other as you would have them do unto you." Our framework argues that a climate might sway individuals to adopt a particular moral paradigm, namely, the morality espoused by Machiavellianism and that this morality will dictate their behaviors within the organizational context. Thus, we showcase

that antisocial behavior may not simply result from people failing to "walk the talk" but might be

fundamentally driven by a morality set that governs behavior.

Our model also adds to the growing literature that seeks to take a more comprehensive

view of positive organizational factors and consider how these desirable characteristics can

sometimes be determinantal. Specifically, we add to nascent theory and research on the dark side

of autonomy and aggrandizement. We extend previous research on autonomy by theorizing

about how it can contribute to a negative climate emergence. For example, our rationale can

serve as the foundation on why being unconstrained by rules and regulations can create

potentially problematic issues for organizations. Further, we demonstrate that aggrandizement

can certainly motivate actors to generate short term successes, but it can also lead to

counterproductive behaviors in certain contexts.

Theoretical Integration

There are a number of theoretical perspectives that could be paired with our model to

further organizational research. For example, scholars may also wish to explore other moderators

on the effect of Machiavellian climate has on employee decision-making. For example, in his

work on impression management, Bolino (1999) suggests that organizational citizenship

behaviors (OCB) will increase as the performance appraisal deadline approaches. In this context,

is the effect of a Machiavellian climate affected by a cyclical or rhythmic pattern? For example,

before month-, quarter-, or year-end, would a Machiavellian climate become more palpable?

How do these workplace cycles synchronize individuals' Machiavellian behaviors (Shipp &

Richardson, 2021)? Overall, we would suspect that our model would benefit from a temporal

perspective (Ancona et al., 2001) to better understand each of the phases (i.e., emergence,

sensemaking, action), especially when combined with an impression management lens (Leary &
Kowalski, 1990).

Organizational climate resides at the organizational level of analysis, implying that it can
be studied at lower levels of analysis, such as the team or individual levels. However, this also
suggests that organizational climate can be studied at the organizational level of analysis.
Popular organization theories, including population ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1977),
institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer &
Salancik, 1978), could also be paired with studying the effect of organizational climate. For
example, certain organizations may move towards a Machiavellian climate based upon
isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), while others may pursue scarce resources in
the environment to acquire power (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). Similarly, macro-oriented scholars
may consider how imprinting (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013), deep historical roots (Klüppel et al.,
2018), or extreme contexts (Hällgren et al., 2018) influence a Machiavellian climate.

Lastly, we envision that our model could be paired with various social theories to
improve our understanding of how internal members learn, perceive, and identify with a climate.
Social role theory (Eagly et al., 2000) could help us understand if certain members of social
groups are more or less likely to promote a Machiavellian climate. Similarly, social identity
theory (Tajfel et al., 1979) would suggest that members of a Machiavellian climate may behave
differently in other workplace contexts (e.g., working with clients, at conferences). In order to
better understand the emergence of a Machiavellian climate, social exchange theory (Blau,
1964), social learning theory (Bandura & McClelland, 1977), and social information processing
theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) are all likely to have a bearing on how people come to
understand "what is done around here" and also how they subsequently promote (or hinder) this

climate. Overall, we believe that a number of social-oriented theories would improve our understanding of climate emergence, especially climates that may run countercultural to the environmental norm.

Future Research

There are several avenues that future research can explore concerning a Machiavellian climate. First, it will be essential to consider the long-term aspects of a Machiavellian climate. Machiavelli argued that adopting his tactics and ideas was the only way for a nation to survive. Although a Machiavellian climate may lead to scandals and cause backlash from stakeholders, can organizations overcome these harmful effects and ultimately benefit from this type of climate? While many organizations succumb to the unethical behavior of their employees, many do not. It is worth understanding how a Machiavellian climate influences the survival and long-term performance of organizations. Are organizations that double down on the norms and behaviors that create a Machiavellian climate more likely to persevere due to their focus on gaining power, which can help them navigate negative consequences? Along these lines, research could consider examining the daily experiences of employees (Kelemen et al., 2020) in a Machiavellian climate.

Future empirical work may also consider looking at how a Machiavellian climate relates to other outcomes. For example, a Machiavellian climate may be related to leader turnover as employees seek to dethrone their leaders in the pursuit of power, which is a relatively objective variable. As a thought experiment, consider a hostile academic department that strongly emphasizes both autonomy and aggrandizement, and ultimately, fosters a Machiavellian climate. This type of environment may lead to rapid changes into key positions, such as the department chair. In pursuing their own power, fellow scholars may criticize the administrative duties of the

current department chair to the dean or might threaten to leave the university unless changes are

made in leadership. Similar patterns have been observed as superstar sports players seek

coaching adjustments, boards of directors oust prominent CEOs, or political agencies pursue

impeachment. Future empirical work should explore how these modern-day mutinies manifest

themselves in relation to Machiavellianism at the organizational level of analysis.

Another possible direction for future researchers is to explore what prompts organizations

to change their climate. Climates are not indefinitely stable over time and change. Specifically,

what values could an organization adopt to thwart the emergence of a Machiavellian climate?

Organizations may not want to eliminate values of autonomy and aggrandizement since these

can foster positive outcomes (e.g., motivation). However, organizations may seek to balance

these values by including values that focus on team harmony and connectedness. This value may

foster within the organization a tight in-group (Castano et al., 2002) and cast competitors as the

out-group. As such, negative workplace behaviors will be less likely to target individuals and

systems within the organization. Organizations could also consider fostering other values,

paradigms, or practices. Case in point, leadership research highlights that individuals in power

can utilize it for the benefit of other stakeholders (Eva et al., 2019; Kelemen et al., 2020). To

limit the emergence of a Machiavellian climate, a company may enclose values of autonomy and

aggrandizement within space or time to encourage the positive outcomes that can result from

power-seeking behaviors. For example, a company may set a temporal window on competitive

behavior (e.g., competition for two weeks) or relegate competition to a specific team (e.g., a call

center that discourages customers from canceling their account). By enclosing these values and

setting clear boundaries, companies may be able to encapsulate autonomy and aggrandizement

and prevent the emergence of a dominant Machiavellian climate, and future research is

encouraged to investigate the presence and mechanisms of this phenomenon.

Finally, we would encourage future research to empirically examine a Machiavellian

climate. Prior research suggests that climate can be empirically measured (Martin & Cullen,

2006). An empirical examination of a Machiavellian climate would help further ground our

theorizing. As this empirical examination could help further demonstrate organizational practices

that facilitate its emergence, it could also mature the nomological net of a Machiavellian climate

to understand how it relates to previously measured climates. This nomological net is important

from an empirical perspective because it can help establish construct validity (Cronbach &

Meehl, 1955). Along this same line, climate scholars may seek to advance our collective ability

to identify climate from an external perspective. To date, much of climate research relies upon

measurements that are dependent upon the perceptions of the members of the group (Schneider

et al., 2013); however, going forward, scholars may consider artifacts or external signals that

could be used as a measurement of a climate. For example, in our context, the bonus-to-base pay

ratio or end-of-year perks may be a variable that could map onto aggrandizement. Alternately,

researchers could use leader and employee social media (Matthews et al., 2021) to capture

variables in our model, such as aggrandizement. Overall, we encourage future scholars to build

upon our contributions while simultaneously forwarding our understanding of moral paradigms

and climates.

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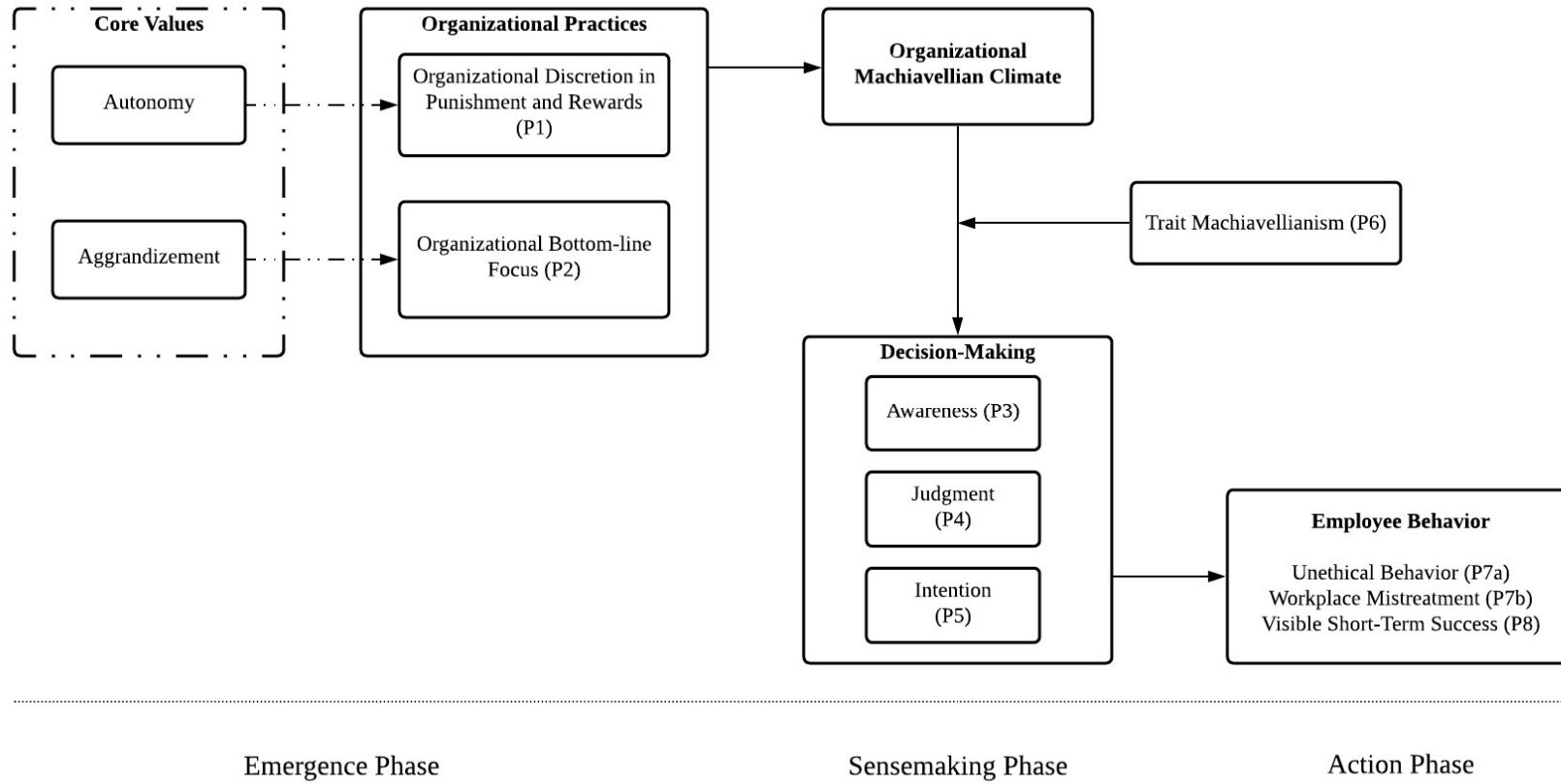Zoltners, A. A., Sinha, P., & Lorimer, S. E. (2016, September 20). Wells Fargo and the slippery slope of sales incentives. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2016/09/wells-fargo-and-the-slippery-slope-of-sales-incentives

Figure 1. Proposed Model of Machiavellian Climate