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## Machiavellianism, trait perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation

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### Abstract

This study examined Machiavellianism, trait perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation in a sample of 483 university students (134 men; 349 women). Socially prescribed perfectionism mediated the association between Machiavellianism and perfectionistic self-presentation for both genders. Thus, the connection between Machiavellianism and perfectionistic self-presentation operated through socially prescribed perfectionism. Overall, Machiavellianism and components of perfectionism appeared to form a theoretically appreciable and an empirically demonstrable personality configuration. Machiavellian perfectionists (a) perceive others as demanding, controlling, punitive, and hostile toward them, (b) promote an image of perfection, capability, and strength to others, and (c) conceal any hint of imperfection, vulnerability, and weakness from others. When Machiavellian individuals perceive perfectionistic demands from significant others, perfectionistic self-presentation is likely to emerge from their chameleon-like repertoire of self-presentational behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

It is not essential, then, that a Prince should have all the good qualities which I have enumerated [e.g., uprightness, mercifulness, religiousness], but it is most essential that he should seem to have them; I will even venture to affirm that if he has and invariably practises them all, they are hurtful, whereas the appearance of having them is useful (Machiavelli, 1513/1999, p. 58).

Personality is an interrelated constellation of traits, not a single trait existing in isolation. Certain traits are likely to co-occur and to form an identifiable personality configuration wherein one trait influences another. In this study, we argue and demonstrate that Machiavellianism (MAC) and components of perfectionism form a theoretically appreciable and an empirically demonstrable personality configuration. Although it has been noted that perfectionism and narcissism and perfectionism and obsessiveness co-occur (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), researchers have not studied whether MAC and perfectionism overlap with one another.

### 1.1. Definitions of constructs

MAC involves aloof manipulation of others, disdain for conventional morality, and viewing humankind with cynicism (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellian individuals may be described as domineering, impersonal, suspicious, practical, cold, deceitful, impervious, and exploitative (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). In an emotionally charged situation involving face-to-face contact and permitting latitude for improvisation, Machiavellian individuals “manipulate more, win more, are persuaded less, [and] persuade others more” (Christie & Geis, p. 312).

Trait perfectionism involves the requirement that oneself or others must be perfect. There are three distinct and stable dimensions of trait perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991): self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., inflexibly and ceaselessly demanding perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., harshly and unrelentingly demanding perfection of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., perceiving that others are rigidly and unrealistically demanding perfection of oneself).

Perfectionistic self-presentation focuses on the expressive features of perfectionism and involves promoting one's supposed perfection to others and/or concealing one's perceived imperfections from others (Hewitt et al., 2003). There are three separate and enduring facets of perfectionistic self-presentation (Hewitt et al.): perfectionistic self-promotion (i.e., proudly and assertively promoting one's supposed perfection to others), nondisclosure of imperfection (i.e., avoiding verbal disclosures of one's perceived imperfections to others), and nondisplay of imperfection (i.e., concealing behavioral displays of one's perceived imperfections from others).

Although trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation overlap, they are empirically and conceptually distinct (Hewitt et al., 2003). Trait perfectionism centers on dispositions and attitudes associated with perfectionism (e.g., rigid self-expectations); whereas perfectionistic

self-presentation focuses on how perfectionists behave in expressing their perfection to others (e.g., self-promotional behaviors). Although a desire to actually be perfect (e.g., self-oriented perfectionism [SOP]) may involve a desire to appear as perfect (e.g., perfectionistic self-promotion), the former does not invariably involve the latter (and vice versa). Finally, regression analyses support the assertion that trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation are separable (Hewitt et al.).

### 1.2. Objectives

The purpose of this study was to provide novel evidence of the relationships among MAC, trait perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation. In doing so, we aimed to elaborate the nomological network in which each construct is situated. To our knowledge, no study has examined MAC and trait perfectionism. Given the longstanding belief that achievement striving is often conducive to interpersonal manipulation and interpersonal manipulation is facilitative of personal achievement (Machiavelli, 1513/1999), the absence of research on MAC and trait perfectionism is somewhat surprising. Moreover, research has not evaluated the association between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation. However, as suggested by our opening quote (and as discussed in more detail below), perfectionistic self-presentation may also relate to MAC. For example, actually being merciful was unimportant to Machiavelli, whereas seeming to be merciful was expedient. Analogously, actually being perfect may be unimportant to Machiavellian individuals, whereas appearing to be perfect may be expedient.

### 1.3. Hypotheses

First, we anticipated that MAC would be associated with other-oriented perfectionism (OOP) because harshly demanding perfection of others seems congruent with Machiavellian individuals' pattern of hostility, dominance, entitlement, exploitativeness, and other-derogation (Fehr, Samson, & Paulhus, 1992).

Second, we anticipated that MAC would be related to socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) because Machiavellian individuals' cognitions and perceptions are generally suggestive of (and perhaps conducive to) SPP. Machiavellian individuals believe that powerful others control valued resources (Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982), perceive that their lives are governed by external forces (Mudrack, 1990), think that they are powerless (McHoskey & Hicks, 1999), and feel that others are hostile (Duffy, Shiflett, & Downey, 1977). Thus, we expected Machiavellian individuals to hold relational schemas wherein critical and powerful others are perceived as making harsh and unrealistic demands. This hypothesis is also consistent with the idea that MAC may represent an effort "to assert influence over a hostile environment" (Mudrack, p. 125).

Third, we expected that MAC would be associated with perfectionistic self-presentation because actively promoting an image of strength, capability, and perfection to others (i.e., perfectionistic self-promotion) and/or defensively concealing any hint of weakness, vulnerability, and imperfection from others (i.e., nondisclosure of imperfection and nondisplay of imperfection) is in keeping with Machiavellian individuals' aloof, dominant, narcissistic, and mistrustful interpersonal style (Gurtman, 1992). Thus, Machiavellian individuals may use perfectionistic

self-presentation as an interpersonal influence tactic to enhance, maintain, and reinforce a desired image of strength and dominance. A connection between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation is further suggested by research on perfectionistic self-presentation and self-presentational tactics. Hewitt et al. (2003) found that perfectionistic self-presentation was linked with assertive self-presentational tactics (e.g., enhancement) typical of Machiavellian individuals (McHoskey, 1995). These data also suggest that perfectionistic self-presentation may involve overt public behaviors designed to control others and to manage impressions.

Fourth, we anticipated that SPP would mediate the relationship between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation based on the following theory and evidence. The first path in our hypothesized mediational model (i.e., MAC is related to SPP) is congruent with evidence indicating that Machiavellian individuals (a) perceive others as hostile, punitive, controlling, and demanding toward them (Duffy et al., 1977) and (b) view the world as a hostile, threatening place controlled by powerful others (Prociuk & Breen, 1976). The second path in our proposed mediational model (i.e., SPP is associated with perfectionistic self-presentation) is consistent with research suggesting that one response to SPP is to attempt to present oneself as perfect to others in an effort to gain their respect and recognition and/or to avoid their censure and punitiveness (Hewitt et al., 2003). Thus, in answer to the question, “Why do Machiavellian individuals attempt to present themselves as perfect to others?” we proposed that the answer is, “Because they perceive that powerful others are hostile, punitive, controlling, and demanding toward them.” Overall, our hypothesized mediational model is consonant with Prociuk and Breen’s assertion that individuals “who believe that powerful others control reinforcements should endorse Machiavellian strategies (e.g., deception)” (p. 141).

We also explored whether each aforementioned hypothesis generalized across gender. Several reasons prompted our interest in gender differences. First, past studies involving MAC (e.g., Rim, 1992) and perfectionism (e.g., Dunn, Gotwals, & Dunn, 2005) have found gender differences. Thus, collapsing across men and women may obscure findings. Second, both MAC researchers (e.g., McHoskey, 2001b) and perfectionism researchers (e.g., van Hanswijck de Jonge & Waller, 2003) have called for more investigations of gender differences in their respective areas. Third, prior research has suggested that MAC may express itself differently in each gender. Braginsky (1970), for example, argued that Machiavellian women manipulate others through self-presentation, whereas Machiavellian men manipulate others through aggressive behavior. Finally, the potential importance of gender differences is suggested by research showing that antisocial men and antisocial women exhibit a differential pattern of comorbid personality pathology (e.g., Hamburger, Lilienfeld, & Hogben, 1996).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 483 university students (134 men; 349 women) registered in psychology courses at University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada completed measures. Men averaged 19.33 years of age ( $SD = 1.90$ ) and 1.79 years of university education ( $SD = 0.97$ ). Women averaged 18.95 years of age ( $SD = 1.54$ ) and 1.53 years of university education ( $SD = 0.67$ ).

## 2.2. Instruments

Participants completed the following measures:

*Machiavellianism*: The MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) is a 20-item scale designed to capture a propensity toward interpersonal manipulation, a cynical view of humankind, and a disdain for conventional morality. Participants indicate their response on a five-point scale. Higher scores denote higher levels of MAC. The reliability and the validity of the MACH-IV are well documented (Christie & Geis; Fehr et al., 1992).

*Trait perfectionism*: The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) is a 45-item scale divided into three 15-item subscales: SOP, OOP, and SPP. Respondents provide their answer on a 7-point scale. Higher scores signify higher levels of trait perfectionism. There is extensive research supporting the validity and the reliability of the MPS (Hewitt & Flett).

*Perfectionistic self-presentation*: The Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003) is a 27-item scale separated into three subscales: perfectionistic self-promotion (10 items), nondisclosure of imperfection (7 items), and nondisplay of imperfection (10 items). Participants offer their selection on a 7-point scale. Higher scores denote higher levels of perfectionistic self-presentation. Hewitt et al. present research attesting to the reliability and the validity of the PSPS.

## 2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate participant pool of the Department of Psychology.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

Means and standard deviations approximated earlier studies that used the MACH-IV (McHoskey, 2001a), MPS (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), and PSPS (Hewitt et al., 2003) in university samples (see Table 1). In addition, alphas ranged from .65 to .89, and are consistent with prior investigations (e.g., Fehr et al., 1992; Hewitt et al.; Hewitt & Flett). The OOP subscale had a slightly lower alpha than in previous research (Hewitt & Flett).

### 3.2. Zero-order correlations

For each gender, MAC was correlated significantly with SPP, perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisclosure of imperfection, nondisplay of imperfection, and the superordinate construct of perfectionistic self-presentation (see Table 1). MAC was associated significantly with OOP in women. Statistical comparisons showed that no significant (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ) differences existed between men and women in terms of the magnitude of the relationship between (a) MAC and trait perfectionism and (b) MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation. This suggests that findings involving zero-order correlations generalized across gender.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the relationship between machiavellianism and perfectionism in men and in women

	MAC (Men)				MAC (Women)			
	<i>r</i>	<i>M</i>	SD	$\alpha$	<i>r</i>	<i>M</i>	SD	$\alpha$
SOP	.02	68.99	14.20	.88	.05	68.76	14.72	.89
OOP	-.01	58.56	9.13	.66	.18***	55.63	9.97	.71
SPP	.33***	57.53	10.30	.73	.27***	53.95	12.54	.83
PSP	.14*	42.12	9.97	.87	.28***	41.18	10.10	.86
NDC	.20**	25.24	6.21	.71	.32***	22.87	6.59	.74
NDP	.17*	43.00	9.84	.84	.28***	43.46	10.66	.87
PRE	.20*	110.37	22.11	.91	.33***	107.51	23.66	.92
MAC	–	58.74	7.51	.65	–	54.58	7.05	.66

Note: SOP = self-oriented perfectionism; OOP = other-oriented perfectionism; SPP = socially prescribed perfectionism; PSP = perfectionistic self-promotion; NDC = nondisclosure of imperfection; NDP = nondisplay of imperfection; PRE = the superordinate construct of perfectionistic self-presentation; MAC = Machiavellianism.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 3.3. Mediation analyses

Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for mediation were followed.<sup>1</sup> As displayed in Fig. 1 for men and in Fig. 2 for women, (a) MAC significantly predicted SPP; (b) SPP significantly predicted perfectionistic self-presentation; (c) MAC significantly predicted perfectionistic self-presentation; (d) SPP significantly predicted perfectionistic self-presentation after accounting for the effect of MAC; and (e) SPP significantly attenuated the direct effect of MAC on perfectionistic self-presentation. Sobel's (1982) test of mediation showed that SPP significantly mediated the association between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation ( $z = 3.50$ ,  $p < .001$  for men;  $z = 4.82$ ,  $p < .001$  for women). Betas and  $p$ -values suggested that (a) SPP fully mediated the link between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in men and (b) SPP partially mediated the connection between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in women. According to Baron and Kenny, a mediator (i.e., SPP) specifies how or why a predictor (i.e., MAC) influences a criterion (i.e., perfectionistic self-presentation). Thus, SPP may represent one possible "mechanism through which" (Baron & Kenny, p. 1173) MAC has an influence on perfectionistic self-presentation.

<sup>1</sup> According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a mediator is a variable that specifies how or why a predictor influences a criterion. When testing our proposed mediational model, the superordinate construct of perfectionistic self-presentation functioned as a criterion, not each facet of perfectionistic self-presentation. Although theory and evidence have supported the usefulness and the importance of distinguishing among perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisclosure of imperfection, and nondisplay of imperfection (Hewitt et al., 2003), in this study it was expected that MAC would be comparably related to each facet of perfectionistic self-presentation. As suggested by Table 1, statistical comparisons indicated that, for men and for women, correlations between MAC and each facet of perfectionistic self-presentation were not significantly different. Thus, we assert that it was appropriate to use the superordinate construct of perfectionistic self-presentation as a criterion in this instance.

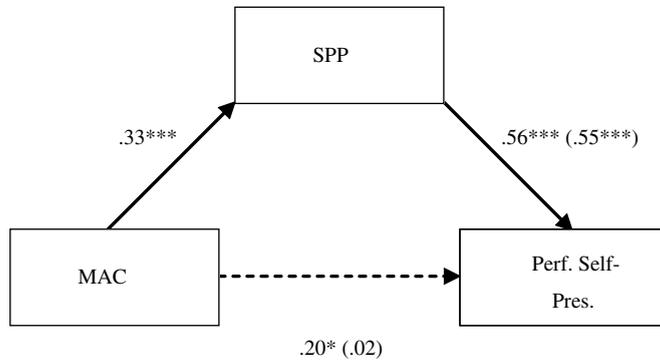


Fig. 1. Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) mediating the relationship between Machiavellianism (MAC) and perfectionistic self-presentation (perf. self-pres.) in men. Unbroken lines represent direct effects. Broken lines represent mediated effects. Numbers outside brackets represent standardized betas. Numbers inside brackets represent standardized betas from the final equation including both the predictor and the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

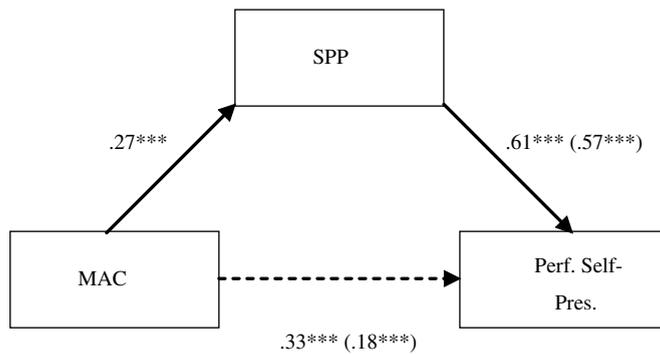


Fig. 2. Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) mediating the relationship between Machiavellianism (MAC) and perfectionistic self-presentation (perf. self-pres.) in women. Unbroken lines represent direct effects. Broken lines represent mediated effects. Numbers outside brackets represent standardized betas. Numbers inside brackets represent standardized betas from the final equation including both the predictor and the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Lastly, the magnitudes of betas for men were compared to the magnitudes of betas for women. As an example, the magnitude of the beta for Machiavellianism predicting perfectionistic self-presentation in men (i.e.,  $\beta = .20$  in Fig. 1) was compared to the magnitude of the beta for Machiavellianism predicting perfectionistic self-presentation in women (i.e.,  $\beta = .33$  in Fig. 2). Comparisons of betas were made in the manner suggested by Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). Only one significant (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ) difference was found between men and women: The beta for the final mediational path for men (i.e.,  $\beta = .02$  in Fig. 1) was significantly lower than the beta for the final mediational path for women (i.e.,  $\beta = .18$  in Fig. 2). This difference is consistent with our description of SPP as a full mediator for men and as a partial mediator for women.

## 4. Discussion

This study examined MAC, trait perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation in 483 undergraduates. The following was found: (a) MAC correlated with OOP, but in women only. In addition, MAC correlated with SPP for each gender. (b) MAC correlated with perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisclosure of imperfection, and nondisplay of imperfection for both genders. (c) SPP fully mediated the association between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in men and partially mediated the link between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in women.

### 4.1. *Machiavellianism and trait perfectionism*

MAC was unrelated to SOP in each gender. This finding suggests that self-driven perfectionistic strivings are not associated with MAC. This result also broadly supports Christie and Geis' (1970) assertion that MAC and need for achievement are uncorrelated.

Although MAC was unrelated to OOP in men, it was associated with OOP in women, suggesting that Machiavellian women tend to harshly and unrelentingly demand perfection of others. However, because the magnitude of the relationship between MAC and OOP in men was only noticeably different—not significantly different—than the magnitude of the association between MAC and OOP in women, caution is needed in interpreting this finding. Finally, the connection between MAC and OOP in women is consistent with prior research suggesting that both MAC (Gurtman, 1992) and OOP (Habke & Flynn, 2002) involve a hostile-dominant interpersonal style.

MAC was related to SPP for both genders, suggesting that Machiavellian individuals may possess relational schemas wherein powerful and demanding others are viewed as making harsh and unobtainable demands. Machiavellian individuals' external orientation may foster perceptions of others as controlling (e.g., Solar & Bruehl, 1971). Additionally, Machiavellian individuals report being raised in a punitive, rejecting parental environment (Touhey, 1973). Exposure to such a child-rearing environment may encourage later perceptions of others as critical and demanding. Ostensibly, the association between MAC and SPP is incompatible with Christie and Geis' (1970) claim that Machiavellian individuals are "[resistant] to social influence" (p. 312). However, perceiving others as critical, punitive, and demanding is different from complying with critical, punitive, and demanding others. Although Machiavellian individuals appear to perceive others as demanding and controlling toward them, this does not necessarily mean that they submit to others' demands and control. In fact, Machiavellian individuals may respond to perceived demands from others with rebellion and resistance, not submission and compliance.

### 4.2. *Machiavellianism and perfectionistic self-presentation*

MAC was correlated with perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisclosure of imperfection, nondisplay of imperfection, and the superordinate construct of perfectionistic self-presentation in each gender, indicating that perfectionistic self-presentation may represent one aspect of Machi-

avellian individuals' chameleon-like repertoire of self-presentational behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Viewed alongside the lack of association between MAC and SOP, this finding suggests that Machiavellian individuals tend to focus on appearing as perfect to others rather than actually striving to be perfect. To rephrase our opening quote, "It is not essential, then, that [Machiavellian individuals] should [actually strive to be perfect], but it is most essential that [they] should [appear as perfect to others]" (Machiavelli, 1513/1999, p. 58).

The relationship between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation is in line with Machiavellian individuals' mistrustful, narcissistic, dominant, and aloof interpersonal style (McHoskey, 2001a). Machiavellian individuals may utilize perfectionistic self-presentation in an effort to gain a competitive advantage over others. Perfectionistic self-presentation may function as an interpersonal influence tactic through which Machiavellian individuals communicate their preferred image of dominance and strength to others. Moreover, Machiavellian individuals are suspicious of and mistrustful toward others (Gurtman, 1992); within a Machiavellian mindset, disclosing or displaying weaknesses to others may be tantamount to inviting victimization from others. Overall, this study is generally consistent with prior research suggesting that Machiavellian individuals are reluctant to exhibit weaknesses to others. For example, Shepperd and Socherman (1997) showed that Machiavellian individuals tend to portray themselves as high in ability and to resist presenting themselves as less competent than they actually are—even when such a display is potentially advantageous.

#### 4.3. *Mediational model*

SPP fully mediated the association between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in men, suggesting that, for men, SPP is "the generative mechanism through which" (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1173) MAC influences perfectionistic self-presentation. Furthermore, SPP partially mediated the relationship between MAC and perfectionistic self-presentation in women, indicating that, for women, multiple factors are involved in transmitting the effect of MAC on perfectionistic self-presentation. Overall, our mediational model is consistent with evidence suggesting that deceptive strategies such as perfectionistic self-presentation "may result not from a feeling of power but from a feeling of powerlessness and dependency" (Solar & Bruehl, 1971, p. 1080). Congruent with research indicating Machiavellian individuals are practical and expedient manipulators (Fehr et al., 1992), when confronted with perfectionistic demands from critical others, Machiavellian individuals seem to choose a deceptive response (i.e., appearing as perfect to others) over a comparatively effortful response (e.g., actually striving for perfection). In Machiavellian individuals typified by socially prescribed relational schemas, perfectionistic self-presentation may be motivated either by the belief that critical and demanding others will supply valued

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<sup>2</sup> The association between MAC and nondisclosure of imperfection is seemingly at odds with evidence indicating that Machiavellian individuals utilize increased self-disclosure to influence others (Brown & Guy, 1983). However, because the depth, veridicality, and emotionality of self-disclosure are not specified in the aforesaid research, it is difficult (if not impossible) to compare their findings to ours. Nondisclosure of imperfection is a defensive, affectively laden form of self-concealment (Hewitt et al., 2003), whereas, in the aforementioned research, Machiavellian individuals may be utilizing a boastful, non-veridical form of disclosure (e.g., "I have a Ph.D. from Yale."), a superficial, unemotional form of disclosure (e.g., "I used to live in Tokyo."), and so forth.

reinforcements if one comes across as perfect or by the conviction that critical and demanding others will withhold anticipated punishments if one seems to be perfect.

#### 4.4. Gender differences

Statistical comparisons of men and women revealed few gender differences. In fact, with respect to direct relationships (i.e., correlations and regressions), no gender differences were observed, suggesting that the basic association between MAC and perfectionism generalized across gender. However, one gender difference involving an indirect, mediational relationship emerged. This finding is discussed above (see *Mediational model* section), and suggests a gender difference in the way in which MAC and perfectionism combine and function as an integrated personality configuration.

#### 4.5. Current limitations and future directions

Future investigators should address several limitations in this research. Namely, this study relied on cross-sectional and correlational data. Experimental research should be designed to extend correlational results and to establish causal relationships among MAC, trait perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation. Longitudinal studies should also be conducted to establish whether self-presentational behaviors engender interpersonal problems for Machiavellian individuals involved in long-term relationships. Finally, ruling out differential item functioning by gender would increase our confidence in the gender differences and similarities observed in this study.

### 5. Study conclusions

In this investigation, we argued and demonstrated that MAC and components of perfectionism form a theoretically appreciable, empirically demonstrable personality configuration. Machiavellian perfectionists (a) perceive others as demanding, controlling, punitive, and hostile toward them, (b) promote an image of perfection, capability, and strength to others, and (c) conceal any hint of imperfection, vulnerability, and weakness from others. The perception of perfectionistic demands from significant others appeared to explain (i.e., mediate) Machiavellian individuals' tendency to engage in perfectionistic self-presentation.

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