

Psychology of strategic deception revealed by online poker

May 26 2016



Online poker offers new insights into the mind-set of scheming Machiavellians, researchers have found.

Researchers from Lancaster University and the University of Helsinki show that the card betting game can be used as a novel way to better understand the psychology of strategic deception. Before now, the trait has rarely been studied in natural settings outside laboratories.

Individuals who engage in amoral and deceptive manipulation, and who tend to seek control over others and gain status for themselves are often described as Machiavellian – after the infamous Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian Renaissance diplomat and author of *The Prince*.

In the paper 'Machiavelli as a poker mate – a naturalistic behavioural study on strategic deception' (published by the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*) researchers show that people with high Machiavellian traits are likely to bluff (pretend they have a strong hand by betting strongly) at a similar rate as low-Machiavellians. However, when they do bluff they bluff bigger. Researchers believe this could be because they like to be in control of situations and relationships.

Dr Jeff Yan, Senior Lecturer at Lancaster University's School of Computing and Communications, led the research with his post-doc researcher Jussi Palomäki (now at the University of Helsinki).

Dr Yan said: "To be a successful poker player, the general advice is to be the one controlling the action. Machiavellians might have an increased propensity to bluff not because they are amoral or desire status in life, but because they dislike showing weakness and generally desire to be in control."

The research, which involved 490 participants playing poker online in an setting similar to the popular website Pokerstars, also found that Machiavellians are also more likely to become angry or upset by being slow-played – which is when players bet weakly with a strong hand to lure opponents into betting strongly. This runs against the conventional perception of cold and rational Machiavellians.

"Although Machiavellians have typically been considered to be cold-blooded and calculating, our results show that when they get slow-played, being the target of manipulation elicits strong negative emotions," said Dr Yan. "High Machiavellians generally like to feel in control and dislike showing weakness and might thus be prone to feeling distraught when someone else displays control over them – by making them look weak and exploitable by using their own weapon of deception against them."

"We found a positive correlation between sensitivity to poker losses and Machiavellianism. Losing in poker was emotionally more stressful to High Machiavellians than others."

Participants in the study completed a Machiavellian personality test to determine their levels of cunning. This looked at traits such as 'distrust of others', 'desire for status', 'desire for control', and 'amorality'. They were then subjected to simulated online bluffing tasks using the most popular form of poker – No Limit Texas Hold'em.

The trait 'distrust of others' was found to be linked to the size of bluffs and the trait 'desire for control' was able to predict how often a person was likely to bluff. The characteristic 'amorality' was not linked to bluffing, but was linked to sensitivity to being slow-played.

"Bluffing is an act of deception, whereas getting slow-played is becoming the target of deception," said Dr Yan. "Being the target of deception might trigger negative feelings of being exploited or manipulated, and these feelings seem to be more pronounced in individuals who have a disposition for amoral behaviour."

Dr Yan, an experienced poker player, believes his research also offers insights for players of the game.

"Our results also have practical relevance for worldwide [poker](#) players," said Dr Yan. "For example, encountering players who are overly emotional after being the target of a slow-play might indicate they are high Machiavellians and prone to bluffing big. Calling bets made by these players might be more profitable than calling bets made by less emotional people."

"Also, being the target of a successful bluff might elicit strong emotional reactions from high Machiavellian players. This could happen when a

player bluffs an opponent and provocatively shows the bluff afterwards."

This phenomenon, known as bluffing-and-showing, was not evaluated in this study, but provides an avenue for future research."

This study forms part of a wider Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) project 'The deterrence of deception in socio-technical systems'. This project is looking at break-through research on deception, a basic problem at the heart of cyber-crime affecting sectors such as e-commerce and financial services, to deepen our fundamental understanding of how [deception](#) works particularly in online settings.

More information: Jussi Palomäki et al. Machiavelli as a poker mate—A naturalistic behavioural study on strategic deception, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2016.03.089](#)

Provided by Lancaster University

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