

1 **Celebrating the Continued Importance of “Machiavellian Intelligence” Thirty Years On**

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13 **Abstract**

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15 The question of what has shaped primates' (and other species') cognitive capacities, whether technical  
16 or social demands remains a hot topic of inquiry. Indeed, a key area of study within the field of  
17 comparative psychology in the last few decades has been the focus on social life as a driving force  
18 behind the evolution of cognition, studied from behavioral and neurological perspectives, and from  
19 theoretical and empirical perspectives. Reflecting on contemporary studies of primate social cognition  
20 specifically one cannot ignore the book, *Machiavellian Intelligence*, co-edited by Richard Byrne and  
21 Andrew Whiten (Byrne & Whiten, 1988a). It is a keystone for the field: the volume as a whole has been  
22 cited over 3,000 times, without even including citations to individual chapters. This year, 2018, is the  
23 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first publication of *Machiavellian Intelligence*, and with this special issue of the  
24 *Journal of Comparative Psychology* we mark that milestone. The key concept put forth in *Machiavellian*  
25 *Intelligence* was that primates' socio-cognitive abilities were shaped by the complex social worlds that  
26 they inhabited, rather than the technical or foraging challenges that they faced, as had previously been  
27 posited. In this issue, we consider the strength of the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis 30 years on  
28 to explain primate social cognition, and we consider its applicability to non-primate species and to other  
29 cognitive domains.

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31 **Keywords:** Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis; social intelligence hypothesis; social cognition; brain  
32 size; encephalization quotient

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34 **Introduction**

35 “The idea of social intelligence is one whose time has come, but such ideas have been struggling to the  
36 surface for some time, in interestingly different forms” (Whiten & Byrne, 1988a, p.1)

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38 From reading Humphrey’s (1976) essay, *The Social Function of Intellect*, Whiten and Byrne (1988a)  
39 identified three hypotheses regarding the interplay between social complexity and intelligence (Whiten,  
40 this issue). These were that species, such as primates, that live in complex social systems have evolved  
41 cognitive adaptations to negotiate their social environment; that social complexity selects for greater  
42 general intelligence; and that social complexity selects for more sophisticated *social cognition*  
43 specifically. And so were born the nascent ideas that ultimately formed the Machiavellian intelligence  
44 hypothesis (MIH). Importantly, MIH directed focus on primates’ cognitive skills in the social realm,  
45 rather than in the technical realm and, more specifically, how the challenges that socially-living primates  
46 face have shaped their intelligence. To create a cohesive discussion around this topic, which had been  
47 contemplated contemporaneously by a number of scholars, including Humphrey (1976), Jolly (1966),  
48 and Kummer and Goodall (1985), and often using different terminology, Byrne and Whiten (1998a)  
49 published the edited volume *Machiavellian Intelligence*.

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51 With *Machiavellian Intelligence*, Byrne and Whiten (1998a) brought together a collection of chapters,  
52 some which represented previously-published works (e.g., Humphrey, 1988; Jolly, 1988; Cheney &  
53 Seyfarth, 1988) and some that were novel contributions (e.g., Harcourt, 1988; Premack, 1988; Wynn,  
54 1988). The chapters in *Machiavellian Intelligence* discussed topics related to social behavior and  
55 collective action (Chance & Mead, 1988; Menzel, 1988), primates’ understanding of social relationships  
56 (Dasser, 1988; Seyfarth & Cheney, 1988), and how primates use that understanding to manipulate the  
57 actions of others for their own benefit (so-called tactical deception, Byrne & Whiten, 1988b; Whiten &

58 Byrne 1988b) and to form alliances (e.g., de Waal, 1988; Kummer, 1988). The book also contained  
59 contributions from authors who considered these topics in relation to human behavior (LaFrenière,  
60 1988; Smith, 1988), thus providing a comparative perspective with our own species.

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62 In the 30 years since the publication of *Machiavellian Intelligence* it has been well established that  
63 conspecifics influence the daily decision making of individual primates, and these interactions may be  
64 mediated further by the primates' relative rank (e.g., Kendal et al., 2015; Lee & Cowlishaw, 2017), age,  
65 (e.g., Biro et al., 2003) or sex (e.g., Lonsdorf et al., 2004; van de Waal et al., 2010), to name a few  
66 factors. More specifically, much work has investigated primates', and other species', cognitive abilities in  
67 the social domain (e.g., de Waal & Ferrari, 2012; Seyfarth & Cheney, 2017), as well as what mechanisms  
68 might be homologous to those of humans (e.g., Banaji & Gelman, 2013; Tremblay et al., 2017). However,  
69 there has been remarkably limited investigation formally testing the hypotheses laid out by Whiten and  
70 Byrne (1988a). In particular, little work has tested the relationship between species' cognitive skills  
71 *specific to* the social domain, with the complexity of their social structure or the average group size in  
72 which they live. In spite of this, the theories discussed by Byrne and Whiten (1988a) continue to be cited  
73 in contemporary empirical and theoretical work regarding a variety of species (e.g., Bshary, 2011;  
74 Plotnik & Clayton, 2015; Farris, 2016; Hall & Brosnan, 2016; Reichert & Quinn, 2017; Bereczkei, 2018),  
75 even inspiring book titles such as *Macachiavellian Intelligence* (Maestripieri, 2007). In recognition of the  
76 importance of *Machiavellian Intelligence*, and to highlight what advances have been made in the last 30  
77 years in testing the MIH, in this special issue we include invited essays by both Byrne (this issue) and  
78 Whiten (this issue). In their essays Byrne and Whiten outline the foundations of the MIH while reflecting  
79 on contemporary considerations of primate social intelligence. In addition to Byrne and Whiten's  
80 retrospective essays, we also showcase two empirical studies (Schweinfurth et al., this issue; Borgeaud

81 & Bshary, this issue) and a review by Lucas et al. (this issue) that considers how animals' communicative  
82 abilities might interface with the MIH.

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84 In their review, Lucas et al. (this issue) stretch the previous focus of Machiavellian Intelligence on  
85 behavioral interactions to communicative interactions. They consider the interplay between social  
86 complexity and communicative complexity, providing examples from an array of species to support their  
87 arguments, beyond the primate-centered focus of *Machiavellian Intelligence* (Byrne & Whiten, 1988a).

88 In the way that social complexity has been proposed to generate cognitive complexity (i.e. MIH), Lucas  
89 and colleagues outline how social complexity is also associated with more complex vocal  
90 communication. Lucas et al. also highlight how communicative strategies exemplify both the  
91 competitive and cooperative aspects of Machiavellian intelligence. They cite, for example, reports of  
92 low-ranking wild capuchins (*Cebus apella nigrinus*) who deceptively use alarm calls to disperse group  
93 mates and gain access to food resources (Wheeler, 2010; Wheeler & Hammerschmidt, 2012; Kean et al.  
94 2017) and, conversely, how chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) produce rough grunt vocalizations to inform  
95 group mates about the presence and availability of food (Slocombe & Zuberbühler, 2006; Schel et al.,  
96 2013).

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98 In their empirical study, Borgeaud and Bshary (this issue) used an elegant approach to test social  
99 cognition in primates. Borgeaud and Bshary trained wild vervet monkeys (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*),  
100 living at the Inkawu Vervet Project, South Africa, to obtain food from personalized boxes, which the  
101 researchers opened by remote control when specific monkeys approached. They attracted pairs of adult  
102 females to the experimental setup, with their two personal boxes placed in close proximity to one  
103 another, thus potentially creating conflict over the monopolizable food resources. The authors used this  
104 set up to investigate if monkeys anticipate partners' reciprocity decision rules. Specifically, they

105 presented the boxes to dyads of monkeys for which the subordinate monkey had recently been seen to  
106 groom the more-dominant individual or for which no such grooming interaction had occurred. The  
107 questions Borgeaud and Bshary addressed included whether subordinates were less likely to approach  
108 their box when dominants were already present, how this was mediated by their previous grooming  
109 interactions, and how the two monkeys' interactions at the box were influenced by audience effects (i.e.  
110 which other group members were in the vicinity of the boxes). Their results showed some effects of  
111 audience composition on the monkeys' decisions to approach their boxes, however they did not find any  
112 evidence that monkeys took in account their previous grooming-partner in their decisions.

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114 Cooperation and competition are now well recognized as potential aspects of Machiavellian intelligence.  
115 However, in their contribution to this volume, Schweinfurth et al. (this issue) focus on a potentially  
116 neglected facet of social intelligence, which is the ability to engage in coercion. They report observations  
117 of "social tool" use by chimpanzees at the Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage in Zambia. The chimpanzees  
118 were presented with a novel drinking fountain that required the chimpanzees to press buttons to  
119 release juice from the fountain. However, the fountain was located 3m away from the buttons and so  
120 individuals could not simultaneously operate the mechanism and benefit from the juice produced. The  
121 authors report multiple instances in which a 24-year-old male chimpanzee, Bobby, coerced two young  
122 chimpanzees, Kenny (aged six) and Jewel (aged four), to press the buttons while he drank the juice. By  
123 recruiting the two juveniles, and using them as social tools, Bobby was able to increase the rate at which  
124 he drank juice. Schweinfurth et al. liken this behavior to that of previous reports of Japanese macaque  
125 (*Macaca fuscata*, Tokida et al., 1994) and orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*, Völter et al. 2015) mothers  
126 recruiting their infants to obtain out-of-reach food before taking it from the infants to eat themselves.  
127 Thus, the use of social tools by primates (and other species - Schweinfurth et al. also provide examples  
128 from birds) speaks to the "exploitative dimensions" of Machiavellian Intelligence.

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A common misconception about the MIH is that it *only* pertains to primates' skill at competitive or agonistic interactions, likely as a consequence of the impact of Byrne and Whiten's early work on tactical deception among baboons (Whiten & Byrne, 1988b), as well as the adoption of the term "machievelliansim" in modern psychology to refer to a manipulative personality trait (Sloan Wilson et al., 1996). Indeed, Byrne and Whiten, in reference to their observations of baboons, asserted that deception was "a particularly sensitive yardstick for the depth of Machiavellian intelligence a species can display" (Byrne & Whiten, 1988b, p.205). However, as both Byrne (this issue) and Whiten (this issue) point out, the MIH refers to both cooperative as well as competitive aspects of social cognition, as highlighted by the articles included in this special issue. Theoretical modelling has also demonstrated how the competitive challenges that group living creates, can also generate cooperative capacities (Orbell et al. 2004). Indeed, from their recent study of group-movement decision making in wild baboons (*Papio anubis*), Strandburg-Peshkin et al. (2015) concluded "democratic collective action emerging from simple rules is widespread, even in complex, socially stratified societies" (p. 1358). Due in part to the misinterpretation of the term Machiavellian intelligence, or its limited pertinence to certain (non-primate) species, some researchers have adopted the term 'social intelligence hypothesis' or 'social brain hypothesis' (Barton & Dunbar, 1997; Dunbar, 1998) in favor of MIH. However, the social intelligence hypothesis is often used to describe the relationship between social complexity and domain-general cognitive abilities, which is just one of the three potential relationships between social lives and cognition which are encompassed under the umbrella of the MIH (Whiten, this issue).

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However, it is almost certainly this particular aspect of the MIH that has most captured the imagination of the scientific community. There has been a heavy emphasis on work investigating domain-general cognitive ability and its relationship with the skills required to navigate social living. Commonly, in an

153 attempt to discern relationships between social complexity and cognitive skill, researchers have  
154 investigated the correlation between a species' relative brain size, or their encephalization quotient, and  
155 the size of the social groups in which they typically live (reviewed in Reader & Laland, 2002; Byrne, this  
156 issue), as well as neocortex ratio and a species' network efficiency (important when considering  
157 information transmission among group members for example, Pasquaretta et al., 2014). Such research  
158 offers an opportunity for a nuanced perspective, important because, as Barton and Dunbar (1997) noted  
159 "group size may be confounded with other ecological variables, such as diet, home range size and  
160 activity timing, so it is also important to make sure that none of these is the 'real' correlate of neocortex  
161 size" (p. 247, see also Reader & Laland, 2002). In his essay, Byrne (this issue) provides an overview of  
162 this line of investigation while also highlighting recent work that has challenged previously-published  
163 findings that brain size and encephalization quotient are positively correlated with group size.  
164 Specifically, last year DeCasien et al. (2017) reported that diet was a better predictor of primates'  
165 encephalization quotient than was sociality, while Powell et al. (2017) questioned the relationship  
166 between primates' brain size and group size, instead finding a relationship between brain size and home  
167 range size, diet, and activity. Furthermore, Fedorova et al. (2017) compared the relative brain size of 61  
168 woodpecker (*Picidae*) species and found that group-living species had smaller relative brain sizes  
169 compared to those that were solitary. There are, of course, limitations to this approach, not least the  
170 limited picture that can be gained from substituting brain size for cognition, as noted by Barrett (2018).  
171 Addressing this, both Byrne (this issue) and Whiten (this issue) showcase a study, published earlier this  
172 year by Ashton et al. (2018), that empirically tested the role between cognitive skill (problem solving)  
173 and group size with Australian magpies (*Cracticus tibicen dorsalis*). In their intra-species study, Ashton  
174 and colleagues reported that the birds' ability when presented with a battery of cognitive tasks was  
175 related to the group size in which they lived, providing support for the social intelligence hypothesis.  
176 This recent study paves the way for a new generation of empirical investigations of not only the mental



177 hardware supporting Machiavellian intelligence, but also the mechanistic outcomes that have promoted  
178 primates socio-cognitive expertise.

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## 180 **Conclusion**

181 Investigations of primates', and other species', socio-cognitive abilities have amassed since the  
182 publication of *Machiavellian Intelligence* (Byrne & Whiten, 1988a), providing many novel insights into  
183 animals' social intelligence. However, evaluations of the mechanisms driving these skills are still lacking.  
184 As we reflect on the impact of Byrne and Whiten's seminal volume, it is clear that it has had a profound  
185 impact on how we consider animals socio-cognitive abilities, even changing the vernacular we use to  
186 describe it. Highlighting the importance and impact of Byrne and Whiten's MIH, their work has spawned  
187 empirical research in both the lab and field, addressing topics discussed in *Machiavellian Intelligence*,  
188 including deception, theory of mind, and alliance formation cooperation, as well as other areas of social  
189 cognition, such as inequity aversion, communication, and the nuances of social learning mechanisms  
190 and strategies. While contemporary research continues to challenge our notions of what the key drivers  
191 for social intelligence might be, our interest in this topic shows no signs of abating.

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193 It has been our great pleasure to edit this volume, celebrating this seminal scientific work. All three of  
194 our research careers have been directly influenced by the work of Whiten and Byrne, including the ideas  
195 put forth in *Machiavellian Intelligence*. We have each studied aspects of primate social cognition, and  
196 have taken a comparative approach in doing so, studying multiple species including humans. We are  
197 proud to present the novel contributions it contains, which extend and reflect upon the central themes  
198 of *Machiavellian Intelligence*.

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