

Following Orders, Forsaking Ethics:

Abusive Supervision, Moral Disengagement, Blind Obedience, and Malicious Compliance

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Abstract

Abusive supervision has been linked to a range of employee behaviors, yet less is known about how it relates to distinct forms of compliance behaviors. Moral disengagement has acted as a mechanism by which individuals justify morally unsound behaviors to reduce dissonance. This study examined whether abusive supervision predicts blind obedience and/or malicious compliance, and whether moral disengagement moderated those relationships. A series of self-report inventories were analyzed from 279 working adults detailing their perceptions of abusive supervision, participation in blind obedience and malicious compliance, and propensity to morally disengage. Results indicated that abusive supervision was not associated with blind obedience or malicious compliance, and that moral disengagement did not significantly improve model fit as a moderator. However, other significant associations among study variables shed light into the cognitive processes that justify these behaviors. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of cognitive mechanisms that guide and shape workplace behaviors. All theoretical and practical implications are discussed in further detail.

Keywords: abusive supervision, blind obedience, malicious compliance, moral disengagement

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Approximately 90,000 hours of one's life are spent working, equating to one third of an entire lifetime (Naber, n.d.). Considering the time investment that work requires from employees, understanding and improving the workplace dynamics are motivational forces for improving productivity (Emmanuel, 2021). Abusive supervision permeates daily life far beyond the workplace, leading to decreases in employee well-being and maladaptive coping behaviors, such as problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006) and withdrawal (Mawritz et al., 2014). Alongside reports of depression symptoms in employees, symptomology reports have been similar to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, suggesting a longer-lasting effect than surface level interactions (Tepper et al., 2017; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Abusive supervision has also been shown to disrupt employee self-regulation (Thau & Mitchell, 2010), leading to dysfunctional workplace dynamics (Tepper et al., 2017), heightened anger (Simon et al., 2015), and increases in employee paranoia and hypervigilance (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). When employees encounter abusive supervision, they may turn to blind obedience to avoid potential conflict, or may utilize subtle forms of defiance, such as malicious compliance, that preserve the appearance of submission (Tepper, 2007).

Considering the distinct divide between authority-abiding and moral-upholding behaviors, employees who experience abusive supervision may be faced with making a difficult choice. For example, an employee might follow a supervisor's orders verbatim leading to a delay, such as submitting a report late due to the supervisor's revision requests; thus, adhering to formal regulations while knowingly harming productivity. Alternatively, an employee might follow a supervisor's order to break formal organizational rules in order to submit a report on time, in doing so upholding authority-based orders over morals. This tension can be explained by

moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986), which serves as a theoretical moderator to explain the relationship between abusive supervision with blind obedience and malicious compliance. Moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986) provides insight into socio-cognitive behavioral justifications that allow individuals to rationalize self-preserving behaviors through obeying an authority figure via blind obedience, or even when engaging obedient acts with the intention of causing disruption through malicious compliance.

Purpose/Contributions of the Study

The current study investigates the effects of abusive supervision on subsequent employee behavior, focusing on how moral disengagement may enable a subordinate to choose between two behavioral pathways: blind obedience or malicious compliance. Despite literature surrounding followership and the passive role of the subordinate (Carsten et al., 2010; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013), there has been a limited body of research examining the antecedent repercussions of abusive supervision on blind obedience of employees in the workplace. Although abusive supervision's negative impact on employee well-being has been captured (Tepper et al., 2017), less is known about its role in fostering covert behaviors that rely on an employee's intentionality.

As urged by previous studies (Alter, 2015; Morrison, 2024; Scanlan, 2018), the literature surrounding malicious compliance is understudied and leaves a considerable gap in understanding the negative consequences of abusive supervision in the workplace. Additionally, blind obedience as a behavioral reaction to abusive supervision has been largely understudied in relation to employee followership (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2022). By examining the antecedent role of abusive supervision and the moderating role of moral disengagement, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership can sponsor behaviors that

ultimately undermine personal morality or undermine organizational functioning through cognitive neutralizations of behavior.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Abusive Supervision

Definition and Conceptualization

As coined by *Tepper (2000)*, abusive supervision denotes an employee's subjective perception of their supervisor's engagement in sustained, hostile, and aggressive verbal and non-verbal tendencies, while excluding physical contact. An important aspect of *Tepper's (2000)* definition is the exclusion of physical contact between employees and supervisors, separating it from the legal definition of assault and placing it in the context of workplace mistreatment. Examples of abusive supervision include, but are not limited to, public ridicule and criticism, credit taking, loud/angry tantrums, breaking promises, invading privacy, and belittling of subordinates (*Ashforth, 1997; Bies, 2000; Bies & Tripp, 1998; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2017*). Among United States employees, 44% of employees reported repeated experiencing workplace mistreatment by a singular supervisor, and an additional 10% of employees reported experiencing workplace mistreatment at the hands of multiple supervisors (*Workplace Bullying Institute, 2024*).

Prior to *Tepper's (2000)* definition of the term, abusive supervision was conceptualized under an umbrella of terms leading into the 2000s, such as tyrannical supervision, supervisor aggression, and petty tyranny (*Ashforth, 1994; Ashforth, 1997; Tepper et al., 2017*). Broadly, abusive supervision falls under workplace mistreatment, alongside incivility, social undermining, victimization, and workplace bullying; all of which are correlated with decreases in employee productivity, increased stress, and increases in workplace conflict leading to toxicity in the organizational or team culture (*Hershcovis, 2011; Neall & Tuckey, 2014; Restubog et al., 2011; Rospenda & Richman, 2004; Tepper et al., 2017*). Another key aspect of *Tepper's (2000)*

definition is the clarification of employee subjectivity in perceptions of abusive supervision. In order for a supervisor to be “abusive,” their behavior must be perceived as so (Tepper, 2000). Therefore, as the supervisor’s intentions remain at large, the employee’s subjective interpretation must be taken into account (Tepper et al., 2017).

Employees are more likely to perceive a supervisor’s behavior as abusive if they have high levels of certain personal characteristics, such as narcissism, psychological entitlement, state trust, trait paranoia, and emotional instability (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Mawritz et al., 2023; Tepper et al., 2017). Contextual factors, such as normative organizational cultures of abuse and hostile environments (Restubog et al., 2011), conditions of crisis, and a high-achieving team performance (Tepper et al., 2011; Tepper et al., 2017), diminish the employee’s perception of the supervisor acting in an abusive way due to the normative team customs. During conditions of crisis, abusive acts committed by supervisors are more likely to be dismissed by employees as situationally reasonable, especially if those behaviors are not sustained in normal conditions. Normative organizational culture that is permissive of abusive supervision is likely to result in the employee underperceiving abusive acts by their supervisor (Tepper et al., 2011; Tepper et al., 2017). Abusive supervision is not an objective application, as it requires the employee to perceive the abusive conduct using their own subjectivity (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2017). Once the employee perceives the leader’s behavior to be abusive, a number of outcomes and consequences have the potential to blossom.

Consequences and Outcomes Under Abusive Supervision

Nearly 20 years ago, Tepper and colleagues (2006) determined that U.S. companies lose \$23.8 billion yearly due to employee healthcare visits and costs, decrease or loss in productivity, and workplace withdrawal as a consequence of abusive supervision. Interestingly, employee

performance has been found to take two routes when encountering sustained examples of abusive supervision, (1) performance enhancing pathway or (2) performance undermining pathway (Tepper et al., 2017). Utilizing the abusive behavior as a motivating force, an employee has the option to act out of spite in enhancing their task performance to prove the supervisor wrong, prepare for new employment, or attempt to avoid hostility in the workplace.

Alternatively, the performance undermining pathway is another avenue for employees to behaviorally showcase their unhappiness with an abusive supervisor, as resource depletion and negative role modeling reinforce abuse within the work context, leading to employee underperformance (Tepper et al., 2017). Considering the unpredictability in employee behavioral responses and the net loss in overall company profits, abusive supervision can impact workplace productivity and other organization-based outcomes in more ways than one (Tepper et al., 2006; Tepper et al., 2017).

Employee withdrawal behavior has been correlated with abusive supervision, as Tepper (2007) found that employees show a decrease in job satisfaction when encountering sustained abusive supervision, leading to an increase in turnover intentions. Along with decreased employee engagement (Barnes et al., 2015), Zellars et al. (2002) found that abusive supervision was negatively correlated with employee participation in organizational helping behaviors. Additionally, in the realm of workplace fairness, employees experiencing abusive supervisors have reported decreased perceptions of interactional justice, specifically relating to lack of perceptions of fairness in the workplace (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Tepper, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). Moreover in relation to decreased perceptions of fairness, employees have also reported reductions in affective commitment to their workplace, as well as a lack of perceived organizational support (Shoss et al., 2013; Tepper et al., 2008). Insubordination and

counterproductive workplace behaviors (CWBs) have been shown to positively correlate with abusive supervision (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2022; Mackey et al., 2021). Specifically, hostility was shown to increase among team members when there were reports of abusive supervision within the team setting (Mayer et al., 2012), leading to emotional exhaustion and ego depletion among and towards team members, not just the supervisor (Thau & Mitchell, 2010; Wheeler et al., 2013).

Employee well-being is negatively associated with abusive supervision, as symptoms similar to the diagnostic requirements for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been reported in employees after ongoing supervisory abuse (Tepper et al., 2017). With an increase in depression symptoms, sustained abusive supervision has presented itself in employee well-being as a self-regulation impairment, or a lack of self-resources needed to rationalize behaviors (Tepper et al., 2017; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). A depletion of individual self-regulation resources, as a result of abusive supervision, has been found by Thau and Mitchell (2010) to provide rational explanations to employee deviance behaviors. Maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as workplace withdrawal (Mawritz et al., 2014) and problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), have been reported in abusive supervision cases, elevating the issue to be larger than in the context of the workplace. Abusive supervision is a workplace stressor as well, which have been shown to impact the body's stress response holistically through responses triggering the immune system, cardiovascular system, and metabolic system, potentially leading to extremely consequential health effects (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Taking a toll on the employee's well-being outside of the workplace context displays the negative impact of abusive supervisors far beyond the traditional workspace, including creating work-family conflict with spillover effects leading to burnout (Pluut et al., 2022).

Behavioral Reactions to Abusive Supervision

Employees under sustained abusive supervisors have reported higher levels of anger (Simon et al., 2015), as well as increases in paranoia and hypervigilance at work to detect the abusive behavior urgently (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). Impacts on well-being under consistent abusive supervision impact team culture and strain individual relationships within the organization, leading to a decrease in trust and an increase in anxiety from all parties involved (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). Considering the negative impact on employee well-being, team dynamics, and individual relationships, abusive supervision has been found to promote retaliatory behaviors in the workplace (Tepper, 2007). In a 2007 study by Mitchell and Ambrose, abusive supervision was shown to be a positive correlate of interpersonal and organizational deviance, as well as supervisor-directed deviance. Specifically, abusive supervision was positively correlated with interpersonal deviance towards co-workers, or innocent actors, leading to a spiral of instability in the workplace by shattering team dynamic and positive organizational culture (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

Although retaliatory behaviors represent one prominent response to abusive supervision, they do not capture the full range of employee reactions, especially considering context, motivations, and individual differences. Milgram (1963) maintained that followers obey authority figures based on social norms, or maintain obedience to gain hierarchical position or status (Berger et al., 2002). Additionally, counterproductive behaviors are not always a byproduct of individual differences, but may be encouraged by a system, or team, that endorses bad behaviors (Trevino & Brown, 2004). Trevino and Brown (2004) highlight the difficulty in disobeying a supervisor in the business context, as fear of retaliation from management and being ostracized were key points of consensus among survey participants. Thus, rather than

resisting or retaliating, some employees may engage in forms of obedience that reflect submission to authority despite moral conflicts. This alternative pathway warrants a closer examination of blind obedience as a distinct behavioral response to abusive supervision.

Blind Obedience

Definition and Conceptualization

Blind obedience is defined as an individual's conduct in following orders, directives, or demands presented by an authority figure without critical analyzation or evaluation (Milgram, 1963; Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). Thus, the intention behind individual, obedient action is influenced by an authority figure (Ertas Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022; Milgram, 1963). Originally studied by Milgram (1963) in the *XXX experiment*, obedience is a behavioral tendency that predisposes individuals to override personal ethics, morals, and sympathy for others. Obedience is embedded in societal functioning, as social importance is placed on hierarchy and authority early in life (Milgram, 1963; Pfeffer, 1981). The perception of obligation to an authority figure weighs into one's decision to obey, but obedience occurs most often in situations where an authority figure serves a meaningful and significant purpose (Milgram, 1963). In Milgram's (1963) experiment, over half of the participants overrode personal morals to obey an authority figure, demonstrating that a perceived obligation to obey a legitimate, knowledge-possessing authority figure has the ability to overshadow individual morals.

Four primary behaviors have been classified into blind obedience in the workplace (Ertas Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022). These four behaviors include, but are not limited to: (1) individual obedience of order without considering if obeying the request is morally acceptable, (2) respectfully obeying only due to an authority dynamic, (3) individual obedience without knowing circumstances surrounding the order, but merely complying in ignorance to obey the

authority figure, and (4) instantaneous, automatic obedience to orders (Ertas Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022). Collectively, these behaviors reflect a suspension of independent moral evaluation or deliberation in favor of an authority. Within organizational hierarchies, where abusive supervisors, organizational culture, and job security are of concern, such obedience may be reinforced and normalized (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024; Trevino & Brown, 2004). Accordingly, understanding blind obedience requires situating it within the structural and social dynamics of organizational life. In the context of unethical requests from supervisors, followers are faced with an ethical dilemma, as their two pathways diverge between refusing (i.e., disobedience) and complying (i.e., obedience); both of which have important implications on employee well-being in the context of organizational functioning (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024).

Organizational Context and Ethical Climate

The employee's inclination to obey a supervisor emanates from hierarchical structures, suggesting that hierarchy and status indications present a greater ability to invoke rewards and punishments (Bell et al., 2000). The ability to control others, as noted by Kelman and Hamilton (1989), highlights the underlying premise in that making others obedient to one's demands is a function of obtaining one's own needs and desires. Authority provides the structural means to obtain one's wants (Biggart & Hamilton, 1984) as a byproduct of social relation, where the individual feels as if they owe allegiance to the authority figure (Clegg, 2011; Etzioni, 1974). Despite subordinates having their own hierarchy ranking, Pfeffer (1981) suggests that those employees never weigh their status against a supervisor's status, but rather reflect on the authority's legitimacy in enacting consequences before proceeding in obeying or disobeying.

Socially, individuals are taught to respect others with higher authority, power, or structural position than themselves (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). Considering the traditionality

among respecting superiors and taking a subordinate position due to hierarchical rankings, this poses a threat to employees who disobey this formality through sanctions, punishments, and the risk of being labeled as insubordinate (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). As found by Milgram (1963), individuals are more likely to blindly obey an authority figure if they are in a higher position of power or are perceived to have more knowledge or expertise. Although hierarchy and obedience to authority are societally rooted as correct, socially normative behavior, employees that succumb to the authority and obey might be subjected to feelings of employee silence (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). The norm of employee silence in an organization sponsors zero resistance to unethical demands made by a supervisor (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007); thus, perpetuating a system and culture of unethical behavior (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). Additionally, employees that remain silent in blindly following orders are constrained between organizational loyalty and personal morals (Sharuka & Sachin, 2025).

Organizational obedience also depends on context and moral climate (Kuiper et al., 2023). Leaders play a role in modeling and reinforcing acceptable behavior in the workplace (Trevino & Brown, 2004), suggesting that a leader's actions and their role in workplace climate precede ethical behavior in organizations (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). An ethical atmosphere, defined as shared employee perceptions of what constitutes appropriate and unethical conduct (Victor & Cullen, 1988), provides guidelines for acceptable team norms that employees rely on to reduce uncertainties in the workplace (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). However, as evidenced by major corporate collapses (e.g., Enron, WorldCom), supervisors do not always model ethical behavior (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). In many cases, organizational misconduct has been traced to leaders who either acted unethically themselves or explicitly demanded unethical actions from subordinates (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024).

Given supervisors' positional authority and control overvalued outcomes such as pay, promotions, and career mobility, subordinates often perceive them as legitimate and powerful actors within the organizational hierarchy (Tepper et al., 2017). When leaders engage in norm violations or abusive behaviors to assert or reclaim power, employees may experience heightened pressure to comply rather than resist. These dynamics suggest that abusive supervision may create a particularly fertile context for the emergence of blind obedience.

Blind Obedience Under Abusive Supervision

Crimes of obedience have been defined as an individual's actions as a result of orders from an authority figure, in which the individual acts are considered illegal or immoral (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Milgram, 1963). Contextualized for business and organizations, crimes of obedience occur when subordinates acceptingly agree to, follow, and carry out the unethical or illegal requests made by a supervisor (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). This is especially important considering managers that have the power to make decisions that will impact the lives and well-being of employees through pay incentives, performance ratings, and career outlooks (Bell et al., 2000; Siddiqui & Buller, 2024; Tepper et al., 2017). When requests from abusive supervisors are denied by subordinates, the respect and dignity of a supervisor's perceived status can prompt abusive behaviors designed to publicly reclaim power over the offender (Tepper et al., 2017). Abusive supervision can include public ridicule (Tepper et al., 2017), which serves as a mechanism to instill fear and silence feedback and employee voice (Ashforth, 1994). The use of public ridicule by supervisors was suggested by Unver (2025) to reinforce obedience and the structural divide between hierarchies.

Leaders model acceptable behaviors within team settings, leaving subordinates under abusive supervisors prone to developing and sustaining a normative, abusive team culture

(Tepper, 2007; Tepper et al., 2017). Thus, followers often look to their leaders for guidance and directives, subsequently complying with requests (Johnson, 2014). Leaders play a direct role in shaping an ethical organizational climate through proper leadership and accountability of subordinates (Paine, 1994). The trickle-down effect from abusive supervision into team climates emphasizes the permeability of abusive supervision into team cultures and dynamics (Mawritz et al., 2012). The normalization of these behaviors threatens ethical treatment of others within the team setting, as well as ethical conduct generally when under an abusive role model (Tepper et al., 2017). Research has indicated that employees exhibit a wide range of behaviors and outcomes as a consequence of abusive supervision, some being overt deviant acts, such as retaliation and gossip (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007); whereas other behaviors might be more covert, spitefully motivated, such as negative role modeling (Tepper et al., 2017). Followers under toxic leadership styles are more susceptible to manipulation demands from supervisors; thus, being predisposed to engage in more unethical or illegal requests made by supervisors (Johnson, 2014).

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision is positively associated with blind obedience.

Although blind obedience reflects oblivious compliance to an authority figure, obeying does not necessarily imply moral agreement (Graupmann & Frey, 2014). Under conditions of abusive supervision, employees may outwardly conform to directives while simultaneously experiencing resentment, anger, or psychological withdrawal (Graupmann & Frey, 2014; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2017). When employees internally feel opposed to external directives or orders, their subsequent behaviors may comply with the request in a manner that is technically compliant, yet intentionally harmful. In this way, blind obedience may serve as a precursor to a more covert form of resistance, namely malicious compliance.

Malicious Compliance

Definition and Conceptualization

Malicious compliance refers to an individual's malicious intent behind strict rule-following behaviors, adding to an intentional slowdown, decrease in company productivity, or other potential harms to a company that cause a loss in revenue (Alter, 2015). Operating as a type of counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB), malicious compliance is a type of defiance that goes without detection of aggressive intentions due to its passive, outward-facing nature (Morrison, 2024; Scanlan, 2018; Yoshimura & Boon, 2022). Despite serious repercussions, such as losses in efficiency and productivity (Bulman-Pozen & Pozen, 2015), malicious compliance remains a largely understudied area of research. Malicious compliance takes an unconventional approach, while technically remaining compliant with supervisor's requests, the strict, rule-following behavior functions as a form of uncivil obedience that exposes or exploits the various systems to which it complies (Bulman-Pozen & Pozen, 2015).

Classification and Outcomes of Malicious Compliance

Broadly, malicious compliance can be adopted into the CWB framework due to the negative repercussions it has on business functioning, supervisor undermining, and individual team dynamics, teetering between organization-based and interpersonal-based deviance (Alter, 2015; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Scanlan, 2018; Spector et al., 2006). Intentionally following rigid regulations to undermine organizational efficiency could be considered as a covert, passive-aggressive CWB since the compliant behavior is weaponized to cause harm in the organization, or toward an individual (Alter, 2015; Spector et al., 2006). Malicious compliance is viewed as a form of intentional, detrimental workplace compliance, where strictly following supervisor's orders, or institutional policies in a verbatim manner is likely to produce negative consequences

in the future for the supervisor, or the organization (Alter, 2015; Scanlan, 2018). Focusing on more covert behaviors, such as rigidly adhering to rules in ways that undermine organizational effectiveness, has been largely understudied. Malicious compliance highlights the dual role of obedience as both a mechanism for organizational order and a potential vehicle for employee retaliation (Alter, 2015).

Malicious compliance is considered a form of detrimental compliance, which falls under the CWB framework (Alter, 2015). Under the premise of detrimental compliance, employees utilize strict obedience to expose flaws in organizational rules and regulations to reveal inefficiencies, or counterproductive consequences (Bulman-Pozen & Pozen, 2015). For example, employees might rigidly follow safety protocols, leading to a stall in productivity, or adhere so literally to customer service policies that service becomes inefficient and impractical. These behaviors retain the outward appearance of compliance, yet simultaneously function as subtle acts of retaliation, highlighting a silent protest of authority through passive-aggressive behaviors and means (Alter, 2015).

Malicious compliance differs from other workplace deviance behaviors in the individual employee's intentions. Rather than being overtly noncompliant, or covertly unproductive, maliciously compliant acts are intentional in being outwardly compliant in following rules and regulations, but are intended to cause slowdowns or subsequent unfavorable disruptions within the organization (Alter, 2015; Morrison, 2024; Scanlan, 2018; Yoshimura & Boon, 2022). The premise behind malicious compliance is the desire to be outwardly-facing as a rule follower, with the underlying intention of causing harm in the workplace (Alter, 2015; Scanlan, 2018); thus, suggesting a calculated choice in enacting certain behaviors (Yoshimura & Boon, 2022).

Under malicious compliance, the employee's behavior showcases lack of explicit aggressiveness, but is targeted with intention, positioning the behavior to be passive aggressive on the spectrum of workplace deviance (Morrison, 2024; Yoshimura & Boon, 2022). In fact, Scanlan (2018) proposed malicious compliance to be a passive aggressive behavior due to its positive association with implicit aggression, as well as its subsequent methods of justification for malicious behaviors. For example, there is a high level of plausible deniability and justifications made in malicious compliance, as excuses are easily made for employees who deem themselves to be "following orders" (Scanlan, 2018). These justification and rationalization cognitions are a key component of moral disengagement literature (Bandura, 1986), highlighting the social cognitive mechanism that impacts and rationalizes unethical behaviors in the workplace.

Malicious Compliance Under Abusive Supervision

The potential for abusive supervision to create an adverse workplace culture suggests that moral standards are flexible, especially with frequent, clear violations of morals, signaling to employees and subordinates that they can be disregarded (Greenbaum et al., 2017). Negative reciprocity beliefs, the ideology that harmful behaviors should be responded to with similar retaliatory behaviors, were shown to be positively correlated with supervisor-directed deviance when measuring the interaction between workplace deviance and sustained abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). The logic behind the negative reciprocity beliefs parallels those behind malicious compliance, with the main intention to be retaliatory to the actor in an effort to maintain a balance in social interactions. Although negative reciprocity beliefs can be directed at any target if strong enough (Eisenberger et al., 2004; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), malicious compliance offers a direct target for cathartic release due to perceptions of abusive supervision.

Considering the implications of Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) findings, malicious compliance appears to create a passive-aggressive framework for employees to maintain a balance of fairness in interactions covertly, while their supervisor-directed deviance remains compliant with the desires of the actor (Yoshimura & Boon, 2022). In theory, malicious compliance satisfies the employee's need, or desire, for retaliation and correction of workplace injustices, while still maintaining an image of compliance.

Managers and leaders who fail to emphasize the importance of ethics in a team function, or as an organizational directive, foster the risk of deviance in the workplace (Paine, 1994). Team cultures that revolve around trust, openness, and honesty are more likely to engage in compliance behaviors, complying with organizational standards and regulations (Arjoon, 2006). As formally established in prior research, abusive supervision is negatively correlated with trust, openness, and honesty (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Liu et al., 2021). Tepper et al. (2017) established that abusive supervision has repercussions in individual-level outcomes, as well as team-related outcomes. Abusive supervision has been shown to decrease team morale, illustrating a negative impact on team executive functioning as well as a decrease in team productivity (Tepper et al., 2017). In fact, managers who fail to enable ethical conduct through providing adequate systems and resources are just as guilty as those who deliberately promote, and/or engage in, unethical behavior (Paine, 1994). Further, potential downfalls of malicious compliance can spread beyond the supervisor-employee relationship, leaving bleeding effects of disrupted workplace flow, damaging of team relations, and impacting the overall organization's productivity and efficiency (Alter, 2015; Morrison, 2024). Therefore, considering the points of consensus across literature, it can be postulated that abusive supervision has a negative impact on organizational compliance in toxic team dynamics and an indirect relationship with disobedience to compliance standards.

Abusive supervision has consistently been linked to negative workplace outcomes, including diminished perceptions of procedural justice (Tepper, 2000). Research has demonstrated that lower perceptions of fairness are associated with increased engagement in CWBs (Jones, 2009), and lack of procedural justice has been demonstrated to be a significant predictor of malicious compliance (Scanlan, 2018). Since procedural justice refers to the perception of fairness in organizational systems or policies when making decisions, malicious compliance potentially serves as a means to utilize regulations to restore justice infractions if perceived as unfair (Scanlan, 2018). Although the literature on malicious compliance as a formal antecedent is scarce, conceptually, it aligns with the premise that there is compulsion to “get even” in the workplace due to a perceived injustice (Scanlan, 2018). Interactional justice has displayed a negative association with abusive supervision, suggesting an overall lack of organizational justice perceptions when there is sustained abusive supervision (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Tepper, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). Combining the two, chronically low procedural or interpersonal justice erodes trust within organizations (McCardle, 2007); therefore, suggesting that perceptions of injustice at the hands of a supervisor might prompt retaliatory, maliciously compliant behaviors.

The connections among abusive supervision, decreased perceptions of justice, and subsequent retaliatory workplace behaviors suggest that abusive supervision may foster malicious compliance. In this sense, malicious compliance represents a subtle form of protest against perceived injustice, enacted under the guise of rule-following with the intent to undermine authority. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that there is an association between abusive supervision and malicious compliance.

Hypothesis 2: Abusive supervision is positively associated with malicious compliance.

Although abusive supervision has been linked to both blind obedience and malicious compliance, the cognitive mechanism that enables employees to choose between these seemingly contradictory responses remains unclear. Engaging in either blind obedience or malicious compliance necessitates a psychological process through which individuals neutralize anticipated cognitive dissonance or moral self-sanctions. Social cognitive theories suggests that individuals do not act against their moral standards without first disengaging from their morals (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement may serve as the underlying mechanism that enables employees to either comply unquestioningly with unethical directives, or engage in covert retaliation through malicious compliance, through cognitively justifying and neutralizing threats to morality.

Moral Disengagement

Definition and Conceptualization

Morals denote the development of standards of right and wrong that govern and guide behaviors, leading to refrainment of actions that would violate those moral standards (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986, 1999) established that ethical reasoning behind actions and moral conduct is motivated and regulated through self-regulatory and self-reflective mechanisms. When an individual violates their moral standards, there is a risk of individual decreases in self-worth and personal satisfaction, suggesting that positive and negative feedback assist in aligning behaviors with moral values to reduce cognitive dissonance (Bandura, 2002). Negative affect has been expressed when cognitive dissonance is present when an individual is engaging in inconsistent behaviors, sponsoring motivation to reduce the dissonance (Graupmann & Frey, 2024). When unethical actions against moral standards occur, and the individual remains guiltless and shameless by their actions, a series of justifying cognitions occur to rationalize the unethical

behavior, suggesting a social and cognitive component to understanding moral disengagement and behavioral motivations (Bandura, 1986; 1990; 1991; 1999; 2002).

Conceptualized as an individual-level phenomenon, Bandura (1986) suggests that the moral disengagement is a social cognitive theory by which individuals justify unethical conduct through cognitive rationalization and neutralization of behaviors. Moral disengagement acts as a cognitive mechanism to explain rationalization of behavior between the self, the environment, and the conduct in question (Newman et al., 2020). Moral disengagement relies on a series of eight cognitive mechanisms that allow for moral justification of immoral/unethical behavior to lessen psychological distress, or dissonance (Bandura, 1986; 1999). The mechanisms are as follows: (1) Moral Justification, (2) Euphemistic Labeling, (3) Advantageous Comparison, (4) Displacement of Responsibility, (5) Diffusion of Responsibility, (6) Disregarding or Distorting of Consequences, (7) Dehumanization, and (8) Attributions of Blame (Bandura, 1999).

Despite Bandura's (1999) original proposal that all mechanisms occur in a linear progression for lapses in moral reasoning, Newman et al. (2020) proposes individuals move fluidly through mechanisms, without a clear, linear progression, which can lead to individuals utilizing multiple mechanisms at once for rationalization of behaviors. Additionally, Moore et al. (2012) suggests contextual activation of different mechanisms for morally disengaging, proposing that various circumstances can be triggering for certain mechanisms. The eight mechanisms can be examined as one higher-order construct explaining moral disengagement, or four second-order factors (Bandura, 1999). Second-order groupings of the mechanisms can be separated into four different loci (behavioral, agency, outcomes, and victim) to better understand mechanisms by which individuals morally disengage (Bandura, 1999; Newman et al., 2020).

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Behavioral Locus

Moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison fall under the behavioral locus, where unethical behaviors and conduct are rationalized. Under moral justification, immoral behaviors are rationalized by serving a social, or moral, purpose (Bandura, 1999). Statements that aim towards serving a higher purpose, such as, “we are helping them by doing this,” outline the premise behind moral justification. Euphemistic labeling allows individuals to lapse in moral reasoning through verbally cleansing unethical conduct (Bandura, 1999). For example, during a corporate layoff, the CEO might express that the company is “downsizing,” “rightsizing,” or “streamlining” instead of laying off, or firing, employees. Immoral behavior can also be made acceptable through comparisons to conduct that is subjectively worse, such as saying, “doing *this* is not as bad as doing *that*,” which is indicative of advantageous comparison (Newman et al., 2020).

Agency Locus

Displacement of responsibility and diffusion of responsibility comprise the agency locus, as individuals tend to make sense of their actions and choices using the two mechanisms. Displacement of responsibility refers to the refusal to take accountability for unethical behavior because it was determined by a higher authority in the organization (Bandura, 1999). For example, expressing that one’s boss “made them do it” instead of taking ownership showcases an employee’s displacement of responsibility. Diffusion of responsibility also refers to the refusal to take accountability in unethical actions due to the individual not feeling personally responsible for their conduct due to mass participation (Bandura, 1999; Newman et al., 2020). In the workplace, diffusion of responsibility can be assessed through statements such as, “everyone is doing it,” or “I’m just playing a role in the process.”

Outcomes Locus

The outcomes locus only includes the disregard or distortion of consequences mechanism, which leads to individuals minimizing and ignoring negative consequences. Disregard or distortion of consequences allows for a lapse in moral engagement through verbally diminishing the consequences, outwardly ignoring the harm caused, expressing the harm is less impactful than it is, or arguing they are not the true culprit of the harm caused (Bandura, 1999). This is especially helpful for justification of unethical conduct when the impact is not directly visible (Bandura, 2002). For example, if Team X suggests conducting a layoff in the company, but the behavior has to be carried out by another team, Team X morally disengages from their suggestion, as they are not the true culprit of the harm caused within the organization since Team X did not carry it out.

Victim Locus

Lastly, the victim locus focuses on the victim of one's unethical behavior, suggesting that individuals are less empathetic to the victims through the mechanisms of dehumanization and attribution of blame. Dehumanization removes the human-like aspects of the victim, typically due to the victim's treatment of others, to make them appear deserving of immoral conduct (Bandura, 1999). For example, referring to employees as "liabilities" before firing them removes all human aspects from the decision. Attribution of blame reverses the blame onto the victim, or others, to reduce accountability of immoral actions (Bandura, 1999). Statements such as, "they brought it upon themselves," is a prime example of attribution of blame.

Outcomes of Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is more likely to emerge in response to negative workplace experiences, such as abusive supervision, rather than being mitigated by positive experiences

(Ogunfowora et al., 2021). This suggests that negative events have a disproportionate influence on employees' cognitive justifications for engaging in unethical behavior, compared to the buffering effects of positive events (Detert et al., 2008). Newman et al. (2020) found that moral disengagement is positively associated with individual-level CWBs, namely employee silence. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, Newman et al. (2020) also demonstrated that moral disengagement operates at the group level, where shared disengagement norms are associated with increased workplace deviance. Importantly, these findings suggest that moral disengagement may not only predict deviance directly, but may also shape the extent to which individuals are willing to utilize deviance in the workplace (Moore et al., 2012). As shown by Moore et al. (2012), one's propensity to morally disengage was a strong, consistent predictor of one's behavioral deviance in the workplace. Therefore, higher levels of moral disengagement may amplify the relationship between antecedents and outcomes such as malicious compliance, as individuals feel less constrained by internal moral standards (Moore et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2020).

Moral disengagement provides a framework for understanding why individuals are more or less likely to engage in unethical or immoral conduct (Newman et al., 2020). While ethical leaders reinforce and guide moral standards (Newman et al., 2020), abusive supervisors may normalize deviant conduct and weaken employees' moral self-sanctions (Tepper et al., 2017); thus, increasing an employee's propensity to morally disengage. Furthermore, Valle et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between organizational deviance and moral disengagement. Alongside this direct effect, Valle and colleagues (2019) also examined the indirect effect of abusive supervision on organizational deviance, mediated by moral disengagement, demonstrating that employees who experience abusive supervision are more likely to cognitively

justify unethical behaviors that contribute to workplace deviance. In relation to individual differences, men have been seen to have higher levels of moral disengagement, or morally disengage more from their actions, as compared to women (Detert et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2017).

Moral Disengagement and Abusive Supervision

Although an individual process, moral disengagement is especially prominent under leaders who exert power over their group and establish an accepting, or permissive, climate of lax morality; leading to corruption in the organization through a social contagion process (Newman et al., 2020). As referenced by Ogunfowora and colleagues' (2021) meta-analysis, sustained abusive supervision decreases moral standards within the team dynamic, suggesting a normative moral disengagement climate among team members. Under the abusive supervision framework, there is a lack of perceived fairness and justice through supervisor behaviors that violate team norms, customs, and employee expectations (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Tepper, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). Coupling this information, persistent exposure to organizational injustices increases the likelihood of bystander moral disengagement, suggesting that employees who merely viewed these injustices are at risk as well (Ogunfowora et al., 2021).

In a recent article by Han et al. (2025), a positive correlation was established between perceived abusive supervision and moral disengagement. Moral disengagement has also been positively associated with trait cynicism (Detert et al., 2008), which has been prevalent in the abusive supervision literature as part of the dark side of leadership and cynical morality. This suggests that leaders who engage in moral disengagement display tendencies of abusive supervision through self-serving requests and outwardly violating company norms (Han et al., 2025). Leaders who showcase a lack of ethical conduct increase the risk of personal and

organizational liability, as managers and leaders are meant to consistently model and enforce regulations in an organization to set the precedent for employees (Paine, 1994).

Moral Disengagement and Blind Obedience

Unethical behaviors that result from supervisor requests create moral distress in employees, primarily those who are aware of unethical conduct, but remain silent (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). Milgram's (1963) experiment showcased that many participants complied with the requests of an authority figure, but did so under extreme stress. Considering the increase in visual observations of emotional strain and physiological responses as the authority figure's requests continued (Milgram, 1963), it can be postulated that obedience to an authority figure sponsors feelings of cognitive dissonance when the requests violate moral standards.

Displacement of Responsibility, the refusal of accountability in unethical behavior, is a key facet in Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement. Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2013) reported that an individual's displacement of responsibility was positively associated obedience to an authority figure.

Cognitive rationalizations are exhibited to minimize cognitive distress, suggesting variations in the enactment of moral behaviors are a function of an individual's capacity to disengage with the behavior to reduce dissonance (Bandura, 1986). Moral disengagement has been identified as a predictor of unethical decisions and behaviors due to the cognitive justifications and lapses in self-regulation against misconduct (Moore et al., 2012). Siddiqui and Buller (2024) underscore the importance of moral disengagement, as diffusion of responsibility was positively associated with the intent to obey a supervisor's unethical request. Furthermore, those who engaged in cognitive justification methods were more likely to be obedient, as

compared to those who felt a personal sense of responsibility for the supervisor's request (Siddiqui & Buller, 2024).

Johnson (2014) suggests that moral disengagement sponsors blind follower participation to engage in unethical acts at the request of a leader since disengaging from one's morals allows for participation in immoral conduct while minimizing cognitive dissonance (Bandura, 1986; Newman et al., 2020). Persistent exposure to organizational injustices increases the likelihood of individuals morally disengaging (Ogunfowora et al., 2021). The individual difference of an individual's likelihood to engage in obedient behaviors that contradict personal moral principles is proposed to vary as a function of an individual's ability to morally disengage (Newman et al., 2020). The individual may displace responsibility onto their leader due to a greater perception of agency in the leader due to hierarchical power (Hinrichs, 2007; Siddiqui & Buller, 2024). Therefore, it is hypothesized that blind obedience requires the activation of moral disengagement to justify the individual's actions at the request of an abusive supervisor.

Hypothesis 3: Moral disengagement moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience, such that the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience increases when moral disengagement increases.

Moral Disengagement and Malicious Compliance

As determined by Moore et al. (2012), moral disengagement has predicted unethical decisions and behaviors. Considering the intentionality behind choosing to be maliciously compliant, as compared to other CWBs, these findings highlight a potential theoretical link to understanding a lapse in moral agency. In fact, moral disengagement has shown a positive association with unethical decision making (Detert et al., 2008). Moral disengagement was

shown to be positively correlated with workplace deviance (Han et al., 2025), spotlighting the role it plays in creating a lapse in moral cognition to justify deviant organizational behaviors.

In theory, malicious compliance may serve as a covert retaliatory strategy that allows employees to preserve a sense of moral self-worth while still undermining an abusive authority (Jones, 2009; Scanlan, 2018). By cognitively reframing their behavior as obedience rather than resistance, employees may rely on mechanisms, such as displacement of responsibility or advantageous comparison, to avoid internal cognitions of guilt and shame (Bandura, 2002; Newman et al., 2020). Therefore, it is theorized that malicious compliance requires the use of ethical reasoning to justify the needs of the employee's behavior as necessary when faced with an abusive supervisor.

Hypothesis 4: Moral disengagement moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance, such that the positive relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance increases when moral disengagement is higher.

Summary and Significance

The relationship between abusive supervision and moral disengagement emphasizes the importance of social-cognitive mechanisms that enable lapses in the enactment of moral reasoning, specifically in contexts where abusive supervision is normalized. This study seeks to explore the moderating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between abusive supervision with behaviors that are blindly obedient and/or maliciously compliant to authority demands. Understanding blind obedience through the lens of moral disengagement offers insight into how employees justify compliance with unethical or abusive directives.

Although moral disengagement has traditionally been applied in criminology to explain intentionality and decreased moral agency in individuals, its application to malicious compliance remains unexplored. Understanding malicious compliance through the theory of moral disengagement provides insight into the employees' rationale behind passive-aggressive retaliation. This study seeks to examine whether abusive supervision indirectly drives unethical, although compliant, behaviors by activating moral disengagement as a form of cognitive justification in employees.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating social-cognitive framework explanations and abusive supervision literature to explain malicious compliance, where literature is non-existent. This study also contributes to obedience psychology in examining how antecedents, such as abusive supervision, contribute to blind obedience through means of morally disengaging from demands. Practically, the findings may inform organizational scholars, leaders, and professionals on how abusive supervision behaviors foster covert retaliation that intentionally undermines team performance and organizational efficiencies, or how leadership contributes to unwavering obedience.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Participants

Participants were obtained from CloudResearch, an online survey platform, where the survey items were administered. Participants were awarded \$2.00 for their responses and completion of the survey. Based on a power analysis in G*Power, a minimum sample size of 260 was needed to detect a small effect ($f^2 = .03$) with statistical power at .80. Data were collected from 300 individuals before data screening procedures. Blank responses in the Qualtrics dataset were converted to missing values (*NA*) upon transferring to R for analyses. One participant provided an invalid write-in response (“Heterosexual”) for gender. Since this response did not represent a gender identity, it was recoded as missing prior to missing-data screening. Individuals who failed three or more attention checks were removed from the final sample, resulting in the removal of six participants. LongString responses prompted zero removals, but intra-individual response variability (IRV) prompted the removal of 15 individuals at a 5% variability in scale score responses. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 279 working adults ($N = 279$).

All categorical participant demographics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, and organization type) are listed in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Participant industry of work is reported in Table 5, and all continuous participant demographics (e.g., age, hours worked per week, tenure at company, and Net Promoter Score) are listed in Table 6. Participants were primarily male (57.91%, $n = 161$), with 41.37% identifying as female ($n = 115$) and 0.72% identifying as nonbinary or third gender ($n = 2$). As mentioned above, there was one point of missing data for participant gender responses. Participants ranged in age from 23 years to 83 years old, with an average age of roughly 43 years old ($M = 42.71$, $SD = 10.53$). The majority of participants identified as Caucasian/White (76.70%, $n = 214$), followed by African American/Black (10.75%,

$n = 30$) and Asian (8.60%, $n = 24$). In regards to ethnicity, 12.54% of participants ($n = 35$) identified as being from Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano origin.

Table 1

Gender Characteristics of Participants

Gender	<i>n</i>	%
Female	115	41.37
Male	161	57.91
Nonbinary/Third Gender	2	0.72

Note. $N = 279$. One missing data point recorded for gender.

Table 2

Race Characteristics of Participants

Race	<i>n</i>	%
African American/Black	30	10.75
Asian American/Asian	24	8.60
Caucasian/White	214	76.70
Alaskan Native	1	0.36
Mixed Race (fill in)	8	2.87
Other (fill in)	2	0.72

Note. $N = 279$. No missing data was reported for race.

Table 3

Ethnicity Characteristics of Participants

Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%
Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano	35	12.54
Not Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano	244	87.46

Note. $N = 279$. No missing data was reported for ethnicity.

Table 4

Organization Type Characteristics of Participants

Organization Type	<i>n</i>	%
For-Profit	193	69.18
Nonprofit	19	6.81
Government	25	8.96
Healthcare	15	5.38
Education	26	9.32
Other (fill in)	1	0.36

Note. *N* = 279. No missing data was reported for organization type.

Participants were employed across several organizational contexts, with the majority working in for-profit organizations (69.18%, *n* = 193). Alongside organizational context, participants also reported the industry in which they work, with the majority working in computer/IT science (19.00%, *n* = 53), healthcare (12.90%, *n* = 36), and education (12.19%, *n* = 34). The average number of hours worked per week in the sample was roughly 44 hours (*M* = 43.89, *SD* = 6.04), with hours worked per week ranging between 23 and 83. Additionally, participants reported an average tenure in their current role to be roughly 10 years (*M* = 9.78, *SD* = 5.90), with responses ranging between three years and 43 years in their current role. One participant declined to rate their Net Promoter Score (NPS). On a 0-10 scale of how likely one is to recommend their company as a place to work, the average NPS was 7.01 (*SD* = 2.20), with scores ranging between 0 (*Not likely at all*) and 10 (*Extremely likely*).

Table 5

Demographic Characteristics of Participant's Work Industry

Participant industry	<i>n</i>	%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting	2	0.72
Utilities	2	0.72
Computer/IT Sciences	53	19.00
Wholesale	7	2.51

Transportation	16	5.73
Real Estate	3	1.08
Education	34	12.19
Healthcare	36	12.90
Hospitality and/or Food and Beverage Services	12	4.30
Legal Services	3	1.08
Construction	8	2.87
Manufacturing	17	6.09
Finance	25	8.96
Arts, Entertainment, Recreation	9	3.23
Government and Public Administration	14	5.02
Scientific/Research	10	3.58
Military	1	0.36
Other (fill in)	27	9.68

Note. $N = 279$. There were no missing data for participant work industry.

Table 6

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic characteristic	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Age	279	42.71	10.53	23	83
Hours worked/week	279	43.89	6.04	23	83
Tenure (years)	279	9.78	5.90	3	43
NPS	278	7.01	2.20	0	10

Note. NPS = Net Promoter Score. One missing response (NA) was detected in the NPS responses. Participant tenure is reflected in years.

Prevalence of abusive supervision in the current study was calculated among participants.

It was reported that 35.13% of participants ($n = 98$) reported never experiencing abusive supervision under their direct supervisor, indicating that 64.87% of participants ($n = 179$) reported at least some abusive supervision. Only one participant reported that their direct

supervisor uses all described behaviors very often (e.g., mean average of 5) with them, indicating the highest attainable measurement of abusive supervision. Additionally, one participant reported that their direct supervisor uses all described behaviors seldom (e.g., mean average of 2) with them, indicating a lower level of perception.

Lastly, supervisor demographics were analyzed from the supervisor priming questions. Participants reported an average of 4.75 years under their direct supervisor ($SD = 4.20$), with responses ranging from roughly 2 months to 31.17 years. The majority of supervisors were reported to be male (60.93%, $n = 170$), with the remaining supervisors reported as female (39.07%, $n = 109$). All supervisor demographics are reported below in Table 7.

Table 7

Demographic Characteristics of Direct Supervisor

Demographic characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Supervisor tenure (years)	279	--	4.74	4.20	0.17	31.17
Supervisor gender	279	--	--	--	--	--
Female	109	39.07	--	--	--	--
Male	170	60.93	--	--	--	--

Note. Demographic characteristics reflect direct supervisor characteristics, not participant demographics. Supervisor tenure is reflected in years. Boldface item represents a demographic characteristic with more than one option.

Materials

Supervisor Priming Questions

Participants were instructed to think about their direct supervisor, which is the individual within the formal organizational hierarchy to whom an employee reports, who assigns and oversees the employee's daily work, provides feedback, and participates in the employee's performance evaluation. If participants had more than one direct supervisor, they were instructed

to think about the one they interact with most on a daily basis. Then, participants were asked a series of priming questions about their direct supervisor to prompt their responses to the rest of the questionnaire. Questions for this section included, “What is your direct supervisor’s first name?”, “How long, in years, has this person been your direct supervisor?” and “What gender does your direct supervisor present to you?”

Abusive Supervision

The Abusive Supervision Questionnaire (ASQ), created by Tepper (2000), consists of 15 questions to assess employee perceptions of abusive supervision. Using a 5-point Likert scale, potential answers include, 1 = *I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me*, 2 = *He/she very seldom uses this behavior with me*, 3 = *He/she occasionally uses this behavior with me*, 4 = *He/she uses this behavior moderately often with me*, and 5 = *He/she uses his behavior very often with me*. All questions were prefaced with the handle, “My supervisor [name]...” to indicate to participants of the context in which they should be examining this behavior, utilizing the name shared from the previous supervisor priming questions to promote association. Potential questions included, “Blames me to save himself/herself embarrassment,” and “Puts me down in front of others.” Higher scores are indicative of an employee’s perception of high levels of abusive supervision. The ASQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\omega = .96$).

Blind Obedience

Organizational blind obedience was measured using the Blind Obedience subscale of the Organizational Obedience Scale, developed by Erats Capan and Uzuncarsili (2022). The subscale contains 9 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with potential answers ranging from, 1 = *I strongly disagree* to 7 = *Absolutely I agree*. Participants were prompted with instructions asking them to rate the level of their participation in the scale statements. Potential items included, “I

believe that employees should do what their managers say, even if they don't know why," and, "I believe that the rules set by a manager should be followed no matter what." Higher scores are indicative of the employee participating in more blind obedience-style behaviors work. The Organizational Blind Obedience scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present sample ($\omega = .87$).

Malicious Compliance

Scanlan (2018) created a scale to measure one's likelihood to engage in maliciously compliant behavior, which consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with potential answers ranging from, 1 = *Never acceptable* to 5 = *Always acceptable*. Participants were prompted in the instructions to recall their employment over the last 30 days to indicate how acceptable they felt it was to engage various behaviors at work. The questionnaire was split in half, as five items related to disliking the company that employed them, and the other five related to disliking their supervisor. Example items include, "Purposefully follow assigned tasks without any modification *if you dislike your supervisor*, knowing that your results could get your supervisor in trouble," and "Strictly follow your organization's policies *if you dislike the company that employs you*, knowing that customers will be unhappy." Higher scores are indicative of a higher likelihood to engage in maliciously compliant acts at work. The scale measuring malicious compliance demonstrated good internal consistency ($\omega = .84$).

Moral Disengagement

Moore et al. (2012) created the Propensity to Morally Disengage scale, resulting in an 8-item measure that assesses one's overall likelihood to morally disengage. Using a 7-point Likert scale, potential answers range from, 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*. Participants were asked to rate the items as to how much they disagreed, or agreed, with the statements. The

administered questions assess each mechanism of moral disengagement with a singular question. Items are as follows: “It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about” (MJ), “Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it” (EL), “Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own accomplishments a bit” (AC), “People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do” (DIS), “People can't be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too” (DIF), “Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal” (DC), “Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt” (DH), and “People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves” (AB). Higher scores are indicative of a higher propensity of the participant morally disengaging. The Propensity to Morally Disengage scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\omega = .88$).

Procedure

The study utilized a cross-sectional, non-experimental design, where participants were recruited through CloudResearch. Participants were administered a series of self-reports through Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Before engaging with the study materials, participants completed a captcha and informed consent, detailing their voluntary participation, purpose of the study, ability to discontinue at any point, and confidentiality of responses. If a participant exited the Qualtrics platform before submitting their responses, their responses were not saved, and were not used in the final analysis. Informed consent for this study is located in Appendix A. Respondents must have agreed to participate before beginning the study, as this item was the only forced response. All other items prompted a response from participants, but were not required in the completion of the study.

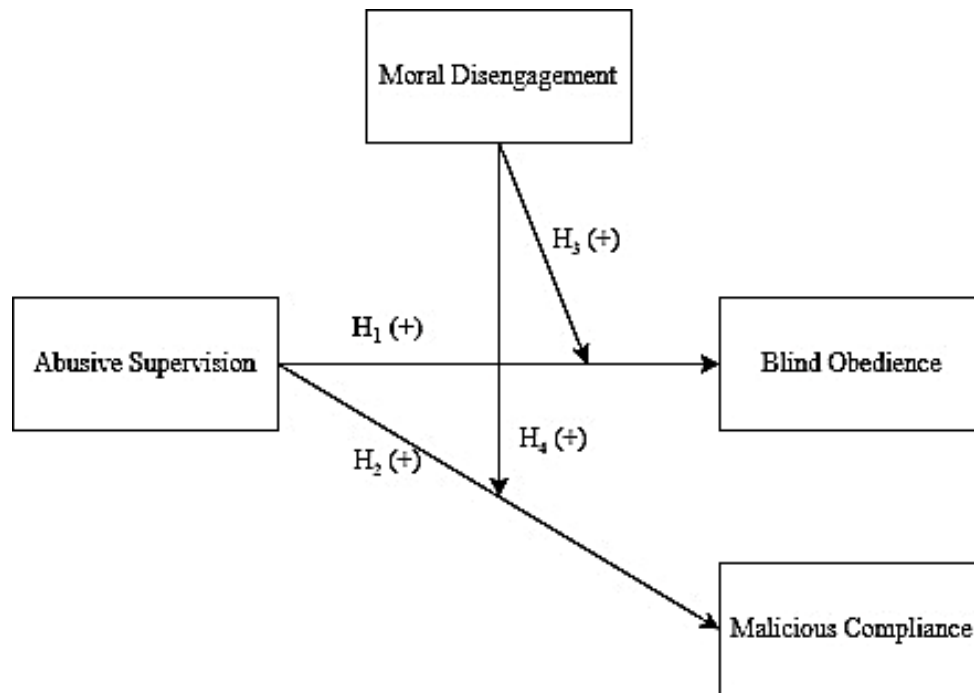
The participants were first asked to report demographic measures, including gender, age, race, ethnicity, hours worked per week, years employed in current job position, the type of organization they are currently working for, as well as the industry of their work. All demographic questions are reported in Appendix B. Supervisor priming questions then queued to prepare participant cognitions towards their direct supervisor for the subsequent series of questionnaires. Participants then responded to a series of self-reports to capture a measure of abusive supervision, blind obedience, malicious compliance, and moral disengagement. Once the survey was completed, participants submitted their responses, were thanked for their time and debriefed, and compensated accordingly. The study's debriefing form is located in Appendix C.

Analyses

All data analyses were conducted using R version 2025.05.1+513. Packages used included *psych* (Revelle, 2024), *effectsize* (Ben-Shachar et al., 2020), and *performance* (Lüdtke et al., 2021). Additional packages included *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2023), *apaTables* (Stanley, 2021), and *interactions* (Long, 2024) all built under R version 4.4.2, and *careless* (Yentes & Wilhelm, 2023) built under R version 4.4.3. All collected data was screened for accuracy of validity check items, outliers, and missing values prior to hypothesis testing. Missing data were recoded to "NA" prior to careless response detection. Erroneous responses that did not pass at least three out of five validity check questions were removed. In assumption checking the main models, outliers were identified using studentized residuals, leverage values, and Cook's Distance. There was no missing data on any of the variables of interest, and only three missing data points on demographic information. Considering the minimal missingness in the sample, missing data was handled through listwise deletion when handling demographic data.

To evaluate the internal consistency of each scale used, McDonald's Omega (ω) was computed. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were calculated to assess relationships among abusive supervision, moral disengagement, blind obedience, and malicious compliance. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested prior to running regression analyses. Associations between demographic data and supervisor priming questions with abusive supervision, moral disengagement, blind obedience, and malicious compliance were assessed to analyze significant differences in parameter estimates.

Hypotheses were tested by fitting two multiple regression models, including an examination of an interaction to assess the moderating effect. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using a bivariate Pearson's correlation and a multiple linear regression to assess the relationship between abusive supervision with blind obedience and malicious compliance, respectively. Hypotheses 3 and 4 were tested to assess the role of moral disengagement as a moderator, examining how the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience (H_3) or abusive supervision and malicious compliance (H_4) vary as a function of moral disengagement. The hypothesized model can be visualized under Figure 1 below.

Figure 1*Hypothesized model*

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): Abusive supervision is positively associated with blind obedience.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2): Abusive supervision is positively associated with malicious compliance.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3): Moral disengagement moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience, such that the positive relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience increases when moral disengagement is higher.

Hypothesis 4 (H_4): Moral disengagement moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance, such that the positive relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance increases when moral disengagement is higher.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Correlations among constructs were assessed and are presented in Table 8. The Pearson's correlation between blind obedience and malicious compliance was statistically significant, $r(277) = -0.16, p = .006, 95\% CI [-0.28, -0.05]$. The correlation reflects a weak, negative relationship between the two constructs. Additionally, the Pearson's correlation between malicious compliance and moral disengagement displayed a small, significant result, $r(277) = 0.17, p = .005, 95\% CI [0.05, 0.28]$. All other correlations between constructs were not significant.

Table 8

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
Abusive Supervision	1.43	0.61	2.14	6.21	1.00	--	--	--
Blind Obedience	4.52	0.94	-0.14	0.19	-0.04	1.00	--	--
Malicious Compliance	3.45	0.81	-0.25	-0.50	0.06	-0.16*	1.00	--
Moral Disengagement	2.15	0.86	1.00	1.47	0.07	0.06	0.17*	1.00

Note. $N = 279$. * Indicates $p < .05$.

Mean differences between participant gender were assessed, as it has been noted in previous studies that men morally disengage more than women (Detert et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2017). Means and standard deviations for the current sample are presented in Table 9. After conducting a one-way ANOVA to assess mean differences across study variables, no significant mean differences were detected between females, males, or nonbinary/third gender participants, as seen in Table 10. Despite the non-significant mean differences in the current sample, gender was still included as a covariate in the regression models.

Table 9*Means and Standard Deviations in Study Variables Across Gender*

Gender	ASQ <i>M (SD)</i>	BO <i>M (SD)</i>	MC <i>M (SD)</i>	MD <i>M (SD)</i>
Female	1.40 (0.59)	4.46 (0.99)	3.47 (0.78)	2.02 (0.73)
Male	1.45 (0.62)	4.58 (0.91)	3.41 (0.83)	2.24 (0.94)
Nonbinary/Third gender	1.00 (0.00)	3.50 (0.71)	4.50 (0.42)	1.94 (0.09)

Note. $N = 279$. Boldface items are indicative of categorical demographics.

Table 10*One-Way ANOVA Results for Study Variables Across Gender*

Gender	<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	90% <i>CI</i>
Abusive Supervision	0.78	2	275	.459	.00	[0.00, 1.00]
Blind Obedience	1.74	2	275	.177	.01	[0.00, 1.00]
Malicious Compliance	1.90	2	275	.151	.01	[0.00, 1.00]
Moral Disengagement	2.27	2	275	.105	.02	[0.00, 1.00]

Note. $N = 279$. η^2 = eta squared.

Correlation Analyses

Associations between abusive supervision and blind obedience and malicious compliance were assessed using a bivariate (Pearson) correlation to examine the total association. A Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the association between abusive supervision and blind obedience. Results indicated that abusive supervision and blind obedience are not significantly correlated, $r(277) = -0.04$, $p = .489$, 95% *CI* [-0.16, 0.08]. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. A Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance. Results indicated a non-significant relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance, $r(277) = 0.06$, $p = .359$, 95% *CI* [-0.06, 0.17]. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Moderation Analyses

Two moderation analyses were conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine whether moral disengagement moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and both blind obedience and malicious compliance, while controlling for gender. Considering the small sample size for nonbinary/third gender participants ($n = 2$), those participants were removed from the following analyses using listwise deletion. Additionally, one NA response was detected and removed using listwise deletion before conducting the analyses, resulting in 276 participants for the regression analyses.

Assumption checks were assessed prior to analysis. Linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and outliers were assessed visually through a series of plots. After visual examination, studentized residuals and Cook's distance were utilized to examine outliers and points of influence. Lastly, multicollinearity was assessed to detect correlations among independent variables. Histograms suggested that both blind obedience and malicious compliance were normally distributed, but both abusive supervision and moral disengagement displayed a positively skewed, leptokurtic distribution. Since no univariate or multivariate outliers were detected in both analyses, and the residuals were normal, nothing was done to correct for the asymmetric distributions. For both moderation analyses, all assumption checks were assessed and met.

Abusive Supervision Predicting Blind Obedience

A hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine whether moral disengagement moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience, controlling for gender. Results are presented in Table 11. The main effects model that assessed the relationship between abusive supervision and moral disengagement on blind obedience was not statistically

significant, $F(3, 272) = 0.85, p = .468, R^2 = .01, 90\% CI [0.00, 0.03]$. Neither abusive supervision ($b = -0.08, \beta = -.05, SE = 0.09, p = .370$), nor moral disengagement ($b = 0.06, \beta = .05, SE = 0.07, p = .395$) significantly predicted blind obedience in the main effects model, after controlling for gender. The main effects model explained 1.00% of overall variance in organizational blind obedience scores.

The moderation analysis was assessed through the addition of an interaction term between abusive supervision and moral disengagement in its association with blind obedience. The interaction model was not statistically significant, $F(4, 271) = 0.64, p = .634, R^2 = .01, 90\% CI [0.00, 0.02]$. The change in variance explained from the main effect model to the interaction model accounted for 0.00% of additional variance explained, $\Delta R^2 = 0.00, 90\% CI [-0.00, 0.00]$. The interaction effect between abusive supervision and moral disengagement was not significant ($b = -0.02, \beta = -.01, SE = 0.11, p = .882$), indicating that moral disengagement does not moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Table 11

Moderation Analysis Predicting Blind Obedience

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>sr</i> ²	<i>sr</i> ² 90% CI	Fit	Difference
Main Effects							
Abusive Supervision	-0.08	0.09	.370	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	<i>R</i> ² = .009 90% CI [0.00, 0.03]	
Moral Disengagement	0.06	0.07	.395	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]		
Gender	0.11	0.12	.331	.00	[-0.01, 0.02]		
Interaction							
Abusive Supervision	-0.05	0.24	.829	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]		
Moral Disengagement	0.08	0.17	.633	.00	[-0.00, 0.01]		
Gender	0.11	0.12	.338	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]		

Abusive Supervision*Moral Disengagement	-0.02	0.11	.882	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]		
						$R^2 = .009$	$\Delta R^2 = .000$
						90% CI	90% CI
						[0.00, 0.02]	[-0.00, 0.00]

Note. $N = 276$. b represents unstandardized regression weights. SE represents standard error. p represents a measure of statistical significance * indicates $p < .05$. sr^2 represents the semi-partial correlation squared. sr^2 90% CI represents the 90% confidence interval of the semi-partial correlation, enclosed by square brackets.

Abusive Supervision Predicting Malicious Compliance

A second hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine whether moral disengagement moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance. Results are presented in Table 12. The main effects model that assessed the relationship between abusive supervision and moral disengagement on malicious compliance was statistically significant, $F(3, 272) = 3.28, p = .021, R^2 = 0.03, 90\% CI [0.00, 0.07]$. Moral disengagement was a significant predictor of an employee engaging in malicious compliance ($b = 0.16, \beta = .18, SE = 0.06, p = .004$), after controlling for abusive supervision and gender. Abusive supervision was not a significant predictor of malicious compliance ($b = 0.06, \beta = .05, SE = 0.08, p = .422$), after controlling for moral disengagement and gender.

The moderation analysis was assessed through the inclusion of an interaction term between abusive supervision and moral disengagement in its association with malicious compliance. Although the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 271) = 2.46, p = .046, R^2 = 0.04, 90\% CI [0.00, 0.07]$, this effect was driven by the effect of moral disengagement on malicious compliance. In fact, the difference in variance accounted for in the interaction model did not improve from the main effect model, $\Delta R^2 = 0.00, 90\% CI [-0.00, 0.00]$. The interaction between abusive supervision and moral disengagement was not significant ($b =$

$-0.02, \beta = -.01, SE = 0.09, p = .859$), indicating that moral disengagement did not moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Table 12

Moderation Analysis Predicting Malicious Compliance

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>sr</i> ²	<i>sr</i> ² 90% CI	Fit	Difference
Main Effects							
Abusive Supervision	0.06	0.08	.422	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	<i>R</i> ² = .035 90% CI [0.00, 0.07]	
Moral Disengagement	0.16	0.06	.004	.03	[-0.00, 0.06]		
Gender	-0.10	0.10	.315	.00	[-0.01, 0.02]		
Interaction							
Abusive Supervision	0.10	0.20	.633	.00	[-0.00, 0.01]	<i>R</i> ² = .035 90% CI [0.00, 0.01]	ΔR^2 = .000 90% CI [-0.00, 0.00]
Moral Disengagement	0.19	0.14	.183	.01	[-0.01, 0.02]		
Gender	-0.10	0.10	.311	.00	[-0.01, 0.02]		
Abusive Supervision*Moral Disengagement	-0.02	0.09	.859	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]		

Note. *N* = 276. *b* represents unstandardized regression weights. *SE* represents standard error. *p* represents a measure of statistical significance * indicates $p < .05$. *sr*² represents the semi-partial correlation squared. *sr*² 90% CI represents the 90% confidence interval of the semi-partial correlation, enclosed by square brackets.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of abusive supervision on subsequent employee behaviors, specifically blind obedience and malicious compliance. Additionally, it was hypothesized that moral disengagement provided a cognitive justification for the employee's rationalization of workplace behaviors under abusive supervision. Drawing on prior research, it was theorized that abusive supervision would predict higher levels of blind obedience and/or malicious compliance, and that these relationships would be stronger among individuals with a higher propensity to morally disengage. With the data from the current sample, none of the hypotheses were supported.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Contrary to all hypotheses, none of the predicted relationships were supported. Results indicated that abusive supervision was not significantly associated with either blind obedience or malicious compliance. Furthermore, moral disengagement did not moderate either relationship. Despite the lack of significance in the theorized models, there were other relationships that emerged from the data analysis. Blind obedience and malicious compliance were negatively associated, indicating that as an employee's blind obedience increases, their likelihood to engage in malicious compliance decreases, and vice versa. Additionally, malicious compliance was positively associated with moral disengagement, suggesting that individuals with a higher propensity to morally disengage are more likely to engage in malicious compliance in the workplace.

The lack of significance in abusive supervision predicting either blind obedience or malicious compliance suggests that abusive supervision may not directly predict employee behaviors in the workplace. One possible explanation is that abusive supervision must be

perceived by the employee and may be heavily context-dependent. Perceptions of abusive supervision have been noted in previous research to vary depending on individual differences of followers, such as neuroticism (Wang et al., 2019), motives to aggress (Williams et al., 2026), narcissism, psychological entitlement, trait paranoia, and emotional instability (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023; Mawritz et al., 2023; Tepper et al., 2017). Additionally, context-dependent factors, such as an organizational culture of abuse (Resutbog et al., 2011) and conditions of crisis (Tepper et al., 2017), have been shown to contribute to lower perceptions of abusive supervision due to norms or alleviating factors. In the present sample, reports of abusive supervision were extremely low, showcasing limited variability in reported experiences of supervisory abuse, which may have reduced the likelihood of detecting relationships between variables. Therefore, employee responses to abusive supervision are more complex and may depend on a variety of contextual factors.

The negative relationship between blind obedience and malicious compliance suggests that employees who obey blindly in the workplace are less likely to engage in acts of malicious compliance, which contributes to the literature. The significant association between malicious compliance and moral disengagement highlights the role of cognitive justification methods in shaping workplace behaviors. The positive relationship suggested that those with a higher propensity to morally disengage participated in more acts of malicious compliance. This aligns with prior research suggesting that moral disengagement allows individuals to engage in behaviors that violate organizational norms and individual morals without experiencing self-sanction (Detert et al., 2008; Han et al., 2025), limiting the impact of cognitive dissonance.

Implications

Although the primary hypotheses were not supported, the findings provide several theoretical and practical insights into how employee behaviors. These findings contribute to the current theoretical literature of abusive supervision, blind obedience, malicious compliance, and moral disengagement. The results indicate that there is not a correlation to be assessed between abusive supervision and any study variables, which could be potentially influenced by the low variability in responses. This is addressed in the limitations section. Despite past research suggesting men morally disengage more than women (Detert et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2017), the current study does not support that conclusion. Although they are weak in strength, the correlations between malicious compliance with blind obedience and moral disengagement further the limited literature on malicious compliance, and associated variables. This finding helps support future research in assessing similar relationships, or exploring theoretical constructs as potential covariates.

From a practical lens, these findings suggest that there are other contextual factors to consider when assessing perceptions of abusive supervision in an organization. In relation to the association between malicious compliance and moral disengagement, organizations are urged to consider touching on ethical principles, and embedding a consistently strong moral code in the culture. For example, organizations could implement ethics training programs designed to reduce moral disengagement and promote accountability of actions, highlighting the role of ethical decision-making in an organization-based context. Additionally, these findings highlight the importance of promoting constructive alternatives to both blind obedience and malicious compliance. In order to encourage employee voice, autonomy, and ethical questioning, organizations should ensure that the directives and culture provide clear, appropriate norms for expressing dissenting opinions and questioning orders. Therefore, fostering an ethical culture that

emphasizes all-party accountability and open communication may assist organizations in mitigating malicious compliance while still promoting an ethically grounded workplace.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the implications of the current research, a number of limitations should be addressed in future research. Although the study design was efficient and cost-effective, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Similarly, the cross-sectional design only allows for data to be collected at a single time point, capturing a momentary glimpse of workplace behaviors, rather than an ongoing pattern of sustained behavior. Future research should utilize a longitudinal design to better understand the directionality of these relationships. All measures were self-reported, which has potential to introduce social desirability bias in responses. Future studies should incorporate a more comprehensive assessment of workplace behaviors through obtaining cross-reference samples from direct supervisors or employee performance ratings.

Additionally, the sample consisted of participants recruited through an online platform at a single time point, which creates potential limitations to generalizability of study results. Future research should examine these relationships in more specific organizational contexts or industries to better understand how context-dependent factors, such as organizational culture or conditions of crisis, impact the results. Lastly, the low amounts of explained variance in the regression models suggest that additional variables may play a role in predicting blind obedience and/or malicious compliance in the workplace. Future research should continue to explore other potential moderators, such as personality traits, organizational culture, or perceptions of organizational justice, to better identify conditions or contexts that influence the direction and strength of the relationship.

It is especially important to note the limitation of the abusive supervision study variable. Considering the primary role this variable played in hypothesis development and modeling, there was minimal variance reported across the entire ASQ scale. Therefore, the prevalence of abusive supervision, in the current study, was not nearly as high as anticipated. This finding itself challenges the prevalence of the findings of the Workplace Bullying Institute (2024), as the average ASQ in the present study was reported to be 1.43, minimally deviating from the lowest possible response. Almost 1/3 of participants reported never experiencing abusive supervision under their direct supervisor, whereas the other 2/3 reported experiencing at least some abusive supervision (e.g., mean scores greater than 1). Although straight-lined responses can sometimes contribute to careless responses, the high frequency of all “I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me” responses likely reflected genuine, low exposure to abusive supervision for a portion of the sample.

It should be noted that frequency and severity of detection are two different things as well. Although the current sample surveyed frequency of abusive supervision, further research is needed to examine the severity of an abusive supervisor, especially if behaviors of abuse are less frequent. Future studies are urged to obtain more measures of contextual organizational factors, such as perceptions of justice or industry-based samples, to better understand the contextual factors that might impact respondent scores at a singular time point. Additionally, future studies should consider obtaining longitudinal data to measure perceptions of abusive supervision over time as a sustained supervisor behavior, rather than gathering data at a singular time point.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

The present study found no direct relationship between abusive supervision and blind obedience or malicious compliance. There was no additional support for moral disengagement moderating those relationships. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the significant relationship between moral disengagement and malicious compliance, implying that employees may use cognitive rationalization mechanisms to justify their behaviors at work. Additionally, the inverse association between blind obedience and malicious compliance demonstrates that employees that engage in more blind obedience are less likely to engage in maliciously compliant acts. Future studies are urged to examine the strength of these relationships among various samples.

Overall, the present study questions whether abusive supervision directly influences specific behavioral outcomes in the workplace. This study contributes to the moral disengagement literature in how cognitive rationalizations shape counterproductive workplace behaviors. Future research should continue to explore moral disengagement as a construct to better understand the cognitive mechanisms by which employees engage in compliance-based behaviors in the workplace. Through discriminating between blind obedience and malicious compliance and demonstrating their inverse relationship, the current study contributes to understanding nuanced employee behaviors on a spectrum. Future examination of both cognitive and contextual factors will be critical for accurately accounting for variance across behavioral reactions to authority, shed insight on individual employee differences, and aid in developing more effective organizational interventions.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled *Following Obedience, Forsaking Ethics: The Dark Side of Abusive Supervision, Moral Disengagement, and Malicious Compliance* is being conducted by Dr. Mark Bowler, a psychologist at East Carolina University (ECU). You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study; students under the age of 18 are not eligible to participate. The overall goal is to survey ~300 individuals who are currently working more than twenty hours per week. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete and completing this survey will award the listed wage of \$2.50. It is hoped that this information will assist us in better understanding how health promoting leadership influences burnout to predict willingness to take leave. Thus, the survey will measure relevant psychological and demographic characteristics with regard to their impact on employee burnout, health promoting leadership and willingness to take leave. Researchers will have access to your Connect CloudResearch Participant ID that is specific to this study. However, this information cannot be associated with your Connect CloudResearch profile or information. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study, though you will not be paid for your time unless the survey is completed appropriately. Additionally, please note that this study contains a validity check to ascertain the authenticity of participant responses. Those participants who are deemed to be answering insincerely will not be awarded payment. Please contact Dr. Mark Bowler (bowlerm@ecu.edu; 252-328-0013) if you have any research related questions or the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

By entering this survey, you are indicating that you have read the consent form, you are age 18 or older and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. Please make sure that you have read and agree to Connect by CloudResearch participant and privacy agreements as these may impact the disclosure and use of your personal information.

Appendix B

Demographic Items

1. What gender do you identify with?

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Non-binary/Third gender
- d. Other (please fill in the blank): _____

2. What is your age? (Options were 18 to 85)

3. What race(s) do you identify with?

- a. African American/Black
- b. Asian American/Asian
- c. Caucasian/White
- d. Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- e. Native American/Alaskan Native
- f. Mixed Race
- g. Other (please fill in the blank): _____

4. Are you from Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano origin?

- a. Yes
- b. No

5. Approximately how many hours a week do you work? (Options were 20 to 85 hours)

6. How long have you been employed in your current job position? (Options were in years ranging from “Less than 1” to 50)

7. What best describes the organization you work for?

- a. For profit
- b. Non-profit
- c. Government
- d. Healthcare
- e. Education
- f. Other (please fill in the blank): _____

8. In which industry do you work?

- a. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting

- b. Utilities
- c. Computer/IT Sciences
- d. Wholesale
- e. Transportation
- f. Broadcasting
- g. Real Estate
- h. Education
- i. Healthcare
- j. Hospitality and/or Food and Beverage Services
- k. Legal Services
- l. Religious
- m. Construction
- n. Manufacturing
- o. Finance
- p. Arts, Entertainment, Recreation
- q. Government and Public Administration
- r. Scientific/Research
- s. Military
- t. Other (please fill in the blank): _____

9. On a scale of 0 – 10, how likely are you to recommend your company as a place to work? (Options were 0 to 10)

Appendix C

Debriefing

Study Debriefing

Thank you for participating in this study. The goal of this study was to gather data related to one's malicious compliance conduct at work. Malicious compliance is defined as intentional undermining of organizational functioning and/or efficiency by complying with directives, or policies. In this survey, we asked you questions regarding your perceptions of abusive supervision (i.e., your perception of if your supervisor acting abusively towards you), questions relating to your likelihood to morally disengage (i.e., willingness to commit immoral acts based on justification of behaviors), and willingness to maliciously comply (i.e., intentionally slowing down workplace procedures by following rules by-the-book based on dislike for a company or supervisor). We are interested in how all of these constructs relate to one another. We also want to evaluate if moral disengagement serves as a middle man between perceptions of abusive supervision and malicious compliance, suggesting a cognitive moral lapse in behavioral acts to justify behaviors.

With the information provided by your answers, we will be able to better understand the totality of the relationship between abusive supervision and malicious compliance, as well as understand employee intent behind their behaviors.

Your participation is not only greatly appreciated by the researchers involved, but this data could aid practitioners and managers on creating more effective and fair performance appraisal systems. Please contact Dr. Mark Bowler (bowlerm@ecu.edu; 252-328-0013) if you have any research related questions or the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

Please do not discuss this study with anyone who is currently participating or who might participate at a future point in time, as it might affect the integrity of our results. Thank you!

Appendix D

Listing

Following Obedience, Forsaking Ethics: The Dark Side of Abusive Supervision, Moral Disengagement, and Malicious Compliance

We are conducting research involving abusive supervision, obedience, moral disengagement, and malicious compliance.

The purpose of this research is to better understand issues relating to abusive supervision in organizations and, in turn, help discover and add to the malicious compliance literature in understanding employee intent behind behaviors and workplace conduct. The survey **specifically targets individuals** working in the United States of America. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey includes several validity check questions that must be answered correctly to receive credit. Select the link below to complete the survey. Be sure to read the consent form at the beginning of the survey. You will receive payment of \$2.50 once the survey has been successfully completed.

The online portal Connect by CloudResearch, will be used to recruit approximately 300 participants working in the United States of America. Connect by CloudResearch is an online crowdsourcing platform. The purpose of Connect by CloudResearch is to help participants find paid tasks. In recent years, Connect by CloudResearch has been extensively used in social science research. Connect by CloudResearch enables researchers to recruit participants to perform tasks such as filling out surveys, opinion polls, cognitive psychological studies, and many others. Researchers advertise their studies on Connect by CloudResearch, and participants choose only those studies that interest them. Participants are paid for completing their studies. Payment is transferred directly to the participants' credit cards immediately after the completion of a study.

Appendix E

IRB Approval



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
 Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
 600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
 Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
 To: [Mark Bowler](#)
 CC:
 Date: 10/22/2025
 Re: [UMCIRB 25-001517](#)
 Negative Effects of Abusive Supervisions

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 10/22/2025. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Dark Side Consent Form v2.docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Dark Side Listing v2.docx(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Dark Side Measures v2.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Dark Side Validity Check.docx(0.01)	Additional Items

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.