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**The unwanted effects of supervisor support: exploring how and when PSS  
leads to employee submissive behaviours**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to challenge the prevailing assumption that submissiveness arises solely from undermining leadership. Specifically, it examines how employee submissive behaviour results from supportive leadership as well. Drawing on the relational model of authority, we hypothesize that perceived supervisor support (PSS) positively influences submissive behaviour, with organizational pride mediating this relationship. Additionally, we propose that proactive personality weakens the direct relationship between PSS and submissiveness. Using a multisource sample of 558 employees and their supervisors, the findings generally support our predictions. The results suggest that PSS may encourage submissiveness, particularly for employees low in proactive personality.

**Keywords:** submissive behaviours; organizational support; pride; proactive personality

## Introduction

Submissive behaviours, broadly defined as individuals' voluntary and unquestioning acceptance of authority directives (Tyler, 1997), refer to individuals' willingness to adopt a subservient attitude, particularly toward authority figures, prioritizing their directives over personal interests (De Clercq et al., 2022; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018). These actions can be manifested in several ways, such as obeying an authority's orders despite lacking a valid reason, and/or deferring to leaders' directives even when they conflict with personal beliefs (De Clercq et al., 2022; Meyer, 2021). Whereas research from Psychology has demonstrated the pervasiveness of submissive behaviours in social relationships, little empirical research has examined this phenomenon within the organizational context (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2022; Fatima et al., 2020; Petersen and Dietz, 2008). This oversight is unfortunate, as management scholars agree that these behaviours are part of the established power dynamic between leaders and employees (Aquino and Lamertz, 2004; Tyler, 1997). Moreover, research has demonstrated that submissiveness also affects the performance of organizations (Chang et al., 2023) and entail both positive and negative consequences (e.g., Buhr et al., 2021; Fatima et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the determinants of submissive behaviours and the processes through which they emerge is fundamental for effective managerial practice (Fatima et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2023).

While early research has focused on the individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits) that predispose individuals to behave submissively (e.g., Moskowitz and Zuroff, 2004; Neves, 2014), more recent scholarship has turned to variables that capture the relationship between employees and their authorities. This increasing interest reflects an acknowledgment that submissive behaviours are fundamentally

tied to the relational dynamics between employees and authority figures, such as direct supervisors (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018; Rios et al., 2015; Tyler, 1997). Research in this field has demonstrated that employees are particularly prone to submissive behaviour in response to negative or undermining leadership (e.g., Fatima et al., 2020). That is, submissive behaviours are deliberately enacted by employees as an avoidance-based coping strategy to manage the distress associated with toxic leadership and to protect themselves from potential future mistreatment (Fatima et al., 2020).

Although this approach has advanced understanding of submissiveness beyond early personality-based models, we argue that we have only partially illuminated the relational nature of submissive behaviours. Specifically, research has overlooked the possibility that employees might submit to their authorities because they perceive their authorities as deserving to be obeyed (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2021; Tyler, 1997). This notion, put forward by the Relational Model of Authority (RMA; Tyler and Lind, 1992; Tyler, 1997), suggests that submissive behaviours could emerge from positive leadership situations, due to employees' belief that their leaders are deserving of their deference. We argue that the exploration of this possibility could extend current understanding of the origins of submissive behaviours beyond the prevailing view that they arise primarily from destructive leadership and, also, may reveal the unintended – and potentially negative – consequences of leadership behaviours that are typically perceived as positive.

This paper theorizes and empirically examines a model that explains how, and under what conditions, submissive behaviours may stem from positive leadership perceptions. Drawing first on the resource perspective within the Relational Model of Authority, which posits that individuals tend to submit to authority figures in

reciprocation for favourable treatment (Tyler and Lind, 1992; Tyler, 1997), we propose that employees who perceive their supervisors as valuing their contributions and caring for their well-being (i.e., perceived supervisor support; Eisenberger et al., 2002) are more likely to reciprocate with behaviours that express deference to supervisory authority and directives, namely, submissive behaviours (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018; Tyler, 1997).

Second, grounded in the identity perspective of the Relational Model of Authority, which holds that individuals derive social identity from the quality of treatment received from their supervisor (Tyler, 1997), we argue that perceived supervisor support also fosters submissive behaviours through an enhanced sense of pleasure in organizational membership (Jones, 2010; Ng and Sorensen, 2008). This mechanism is reflected in employees' expressed pride in their organization. We contend that prouder employees, who place greater value on their organizational membership, are more inclined to accept organizational power dynamics and thus exhibit greater submissiveness toward their direct supervisor (Tyler and Blader, 2002).

Finally, our model recognizes the role of personality in this process, particularly the idea that personality traits shape how individuals interpret and respond to supervisory signals, resulting in different behavioural outcomes (Connelly et al., 2011). Accordingly, we propose that the positive relationship between PSS and submissive behaviours is moderated by employees' proactive personality. Specifically, individuals high in proactive personality have an inner tendency to deliberately initiate future-oriented change and influence their environment (Bateman and Crant, 1993, p. 105; Crant et al., 2016). These individuals are likely to view PSS as an opportunity to express their proactivity, rather than as a cue to follow supervisor requests unquestioningly. In

contrast, individuals low in proactive personality are more maintenance-oriented, preferring to “go with the flow” and let situational forces unfold (Crant et al., 2016). For these employees, PSS should be interpreted as no changes are necessary in job or task activities (Xu et al., 2019), and that supervisor directives should be followed without question. Hence, the positive relationship between PSS and employee submissiveness should be weaker for those with high proactive personality. Figure 1 presents our research model.

Our study brings several contributions. First, we contribute to the emerging research about submissive behaviours in the management literature. By drawing on the Relational Model of Authority (Tyler and Lind, 1992), our study extends the understanding of the origins of submissive behaviours beyond the view that they result from undermining leadership perspective. We demonstrate that these behaviours can also emerge in response to positive leadership contexts, such as perceived supervisor support (PSS), and we expand the theorizing about the processes leading to submissive behaviour and open avenues for future research. Our study advances a potential mechanism anchored on the social identity theory to explain this relationship (i.e., pride in organization). Second, we also contribute to the literature on general management by exploring the effects of leadership styles commonly assumed to produce positive effects (e.g., Xu and Farris, 2024). Specifically, while prior research has mostly associated PSS with positive and constructive employee organizational behaviour, it has neglected the possibility of being associated with unwanted effects (Li et al., 2022). Our study provides meaningful insights into organizational management by showing a more nuanced perspective of the effects of PSS as it integrates potentially negative employee behaviour into a process that is expected to promote positive

responses. Third, our model also allows us to draw important practical implications for managers and organizations. We put forth a potential safeguard (i.e., proactive personality) that shapes how individuals react to PSS in terms of submissive behaviours. That is, we propose that the impact of PSS on employee behaviour varies based on individual personality (more proactive or passive in nature).

--- Figure 1 here ---

### **Employees' submissive behaviours**

Employee submissive behaviour is an umbrella term encompassing actions that reflect obedience, conformity, and deference to authority (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018; Meyer, 2021). Scholars agree that such behaviours are voluntary (Petersen and Dietz, 2008), with individuals deliberately evaluating the circumstances under which they should be displayed (Tyler, 1997). Submissive behaviours are embedded in power dynamics and are often employed by employees to manage and regulate their relationship with authority figures (Tyler, 1997).

For instance, research has shown that employees may strategically adopt submissive behaviours in coercive (e.g., Milgram et al., 1965) and toxic leadership contexts (Fatima et al., 2020). Fatima and colleagues (2020) found that employees exposed to high levels of supervisory undermining experience intense negative emotions, including shame and self-criticism, which prompt submissive behaviour as a coping strategy. This behaviour signals acceptance of existing power dynamics and a lack of intent to challenge authority, thereby seeking to deter further mistreatment.

More recent research has shown that employees also use submissive behaviours to gain advantages and elicit favourable evaluations from authority figures (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023; Graham et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2011). While

supporting the view that submissive behaviours are deliberate, this work extends existing knowledge by showing that employees may also use them to preserve or enhance positive leadership relationships and the benefits these afford. Crucially, this perspective suggests that submissiveness can also emerge in positive leadership contexts. In such cases, employees may be motivated by a genuine desire to please their leaders (Mishra et al., 2022), recognizing the legitimacy of their authority even when they disagree with the leader's actions (Beu and Buckley, 2004; Carsten et al., 2010; De Clercq and Pereira, 2023; Graham et al., 2015).

As noted above, our study contributes to this evolving perspective by further unpacking the mechanisms and boundary conditions under which submissiveness arises in positive leadership contexts. Specifically, we examine the role of perceived supervisor support (PSS), drawing on the Relational Model of Authority (Tyler and Lind, 1992), as outlined below.

### **Employees' submissive behaviours: a relational model of authority perspective**

The Relational Model of Authority (Tyler and Lind, 1992; Tyler, 1997) defines submissive behaviour as individuals' willingness to unquestioningly accept and follow directives from superiors, based on the belief that these authorities are entitled to obedience (De Clercq et al., 2022; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018). According to the model, employees are more likely to defer to authorities when they perceive them as legitimate holders of power (Carsten et al., 2010; De Clercq and Pereira, 2023; Tyler, 1997).

Employees assess the legitimacy of authority figures based on how they are treated by them (Carsten et al., 2010; De Clercq and Pereira, 2023). Favourable treatment (signals that employees are valued) is seen as the primary driver of such submission (Tyler, 1997). When treated positively, employees are more inclined to accept and internalize



organizational power structures and to allow authority figures to shape their behaviour (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018). Empirical research supports this view, showing that submissive behaviours may arise when supervisors grant autonomy (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018) or when employees perceive that their supervisors consider their needs, opinions, and rights (Tyler, 1997).

The Relational Model of Authority advances two key theoretical explanations for voluntary submission to authority. First, from a resource-based perspective, deference stems from employees' evaluation of the resources they have received or expect to receive. In line with social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), favourable treatment motivates employees to reciprocate through deferential behaviour. Submissive actions signal acceptance of the supervisor's authority and non-threatening intentions, increasing the likelihood of continued resource access and supervisor approval.

Second, from an identity-based perspective, employees interpret their treatment by authority figures as indicative of their social standing within the organization. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), this view posits that favourable treatment affirms employees' value and status within the group. Positive evaluations of their standing lead them to form favourable judgements about their social group, which, in turn, fosters internalization of the authority's values and decisions (Simon, 1997). This process increases the likelihood of voluntary submission to authority directives, as individuals seek to preserve their social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Submissive behaviours signal to authority figures that the individual understands and adheres to organizational rules and power dynamics (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018).

As we will discuss below, we draw on both perspectives of the Relational Model of Authority to theorize how perceived supervisor support (PSS) may foster submissive behaviour. PSS refers to employees' evaluations of the extent to which supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). We focus on PSS because it inherently reflects both resource provision and the identity-based perspective (conveying individuals' social status within the organization) (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006; Eisenberger et al., 2022), thereby capturing both processes proposed by the Relational Model of Authority.

### **Perceived Supervisor Support and Employees' Submissive Behaviours: a resource-based perspective**

Supervisor support is widely recognized for enabling employees to fulfil their work-related responsibilities and aspirations (Caesens et al., 2023), and represents a valued resource that employees strive to preserve (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Li et al., 2022). Following the resource-based perspective advanced by the Relational Model of Authority, submission is seen as a strategic behavioural response that signals willingness to maintain the supportive relationship (Tyler, 1997). Employees assess the supervisors' competence to deliver future rewards, and submissive behaviours emerge as rational responses to this appraisal (Tyler, 1997). Such behaviours acknowledge the supervisor's power whilst projecting non-threatening intentions, thereby enhancing prospects for continued access to resources and supervisory approval (De Clerq and Pereira, 2023; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018).

Empirical research reinforces this reasoning by demonstrating that perceived supervisor support is positively associated with perceptions of supervisor competence

(Neves, 2011) and with employees' voluntary acceptance of their decisions (Tyler, 1997). Moreover, autonomy-supportive supervisory styles foster voluntary deference (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018), whilst high PSS has been linked to employees' behaviours that benefit supervisors, even when ethically dubious (Li et al., 2022). These findings collectively underscore that submission may be driven not by coercion but by calculated reciprocity – employees' attempts to sustain a valued relationship and enhance their own standing or outcomes (Gilbert, 2016). When support from supervisors is perceived as favourable and instrumental, it elicits submissive behaviours aimed at reinforcing the relational exchange dynamic that underpins such support. Thus, we posit:

*H1: PSS is positively associated with employees' submissive behaviours.*

## **Perceived Supervisor Support and Employees' Submissive Behaviours: an identity-based perspective**

The identity-based model proposed within the relational model of authority posits that individuals may submit to authority figures due to relational concerns (Tyler and Lind, 1992). It suggests that the treatment employees receive from their supervisors serves as information for evaluating their social standing within the organizational community. These evaluations, in turn, mediate the relationship between supervisor treatment and submission (Tyler and Blader, 2003; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018).

Building on this framework, we argue that pride in organizational membership – a sense of pleasure and self-respect derived from one's affiliation with the organization (Jones, 2010) – should act as a central psychological mechanism explaining why PSS fosters submissive behaviours. As supervisors are viewed as agents of the organization

(Kurtessis et al., 2017), their supportive actions should be interpreted as signals of both personal worth and organizational endorsement (Eisenberger et al., 2002). When employees perceive such favourable treatment, they infer that they occupy a valued position within the organization (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2021), strengthening their organizational identity and self-worth (Tyler and Blader, 2003). Pride in organizational membership should emerge from the perceived favourable treatment conveyed by support received from direct authority (Tyler et al., 1996) because PSS fulfils core socioemotional needs such as esteem and belonging (Rhoades et al., 2001), which fosters a favourable self-image rooted in one's role as an organizational member. Empirical studies support this notion by demonstrating that supervisor support is positively associated with organizational pride (Boezeman and Ellemers, 1997; Mas-Machuca et al., 2016; Ng and Sorensen, 2008).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), this pride enacted by PSS should make employees behave in ways that protect and affirm their organizational identity because individuals behave in ways that preserve and protect group affiliations that bolster their self-concept. Therefore, we posit that prouder employees should be more likely to behave submissively toward their direct supervisor. Research demonstrates that individuals who experience pride are more likely to perceive supervisors' requests as legitimate (Tyler, 2000) and are driven to behave in socially desirable ways to maintain their favourable group status (Sturm et al., 2022; Sznycer et al., 2018). This is consistent with scholars' recognition that submissive behaviours serve as visible signals of alignment with organizational values and authority structures (De Clerq and Pereira, 2023).

In all, we argue that the extent to which employees feel supported by their supervisors influences the likelihood that they will experience pride in their organizational membership. The pride experienced enhances their motivation to conform to expectations and reinforce their positive social standing, making them more inclined to submit to supervisory authority. Thus, pride should function as a key mediating mechanism through which PSS cultivates submissive behaviour in the workplace (Tyler, 1997).

*H2: Pride in the organization mediates the positive relationship between PSS and employees' submissive behaviours.*

### **The moderating role of Proactive Personality**

Scholars agree that employees do not automatically submit to supervisors' requests (Tyler and Blader, 2002). A critical factor is individuals' personality characteristics, with early research on submissiveness consistently demonstrating that some personality traits (e.g., low resilience, low core self-evaluations) make some individuals more inclined to engage in submissive behaviours than others (e.g., Aquino and Lamertz, 2004; De Clercq et al., 2022; Fatima et al., 2020; Moskowitz and Zuroff, 2004; Neves, 2014). Leadership research has also demonstrated that personality traits affect individuals' interpretation of supervisory cues, and their subsequent self-regulatory efforts, thereby leading to different behavioural reactions (e.g., Velez and Neves, 2018; Xu et al., 2019). Accordingly, we contend that employees' personality traits should play a role in explaining the relationship between PSS and submissive behaviours by highlighting for whom this relationship should be more likely.

In our study we focus on proactive personality, which has incremental validity over general Big Five traits in explaining employees' behaviour (Thomas et al., 2010). Proactive personality is defined as individuals' dispositional tendency to bring about change in their environments (Bateman and Crant, 1993). Highly proactive individuals are characterized by tending to identify opportunities and act on them, demonstrate initiative, and persist until meaningful change occurs (Jiang, 2017), because they are autonomously motivated (Parker et al., 2019). Empirical research has demonstrated that these individuals are highly involved with their work (Al-Shamsi et al., 2022) and show great personal initiative in searching out new creative ways to perform their jobs (Alikaj et al., 2023), even in the face of opposition from others (Crant et al., 2016). In contrast, people low in proactive personality are more passive and reactive, preferring to adapt to circumstances rather than change them (Crant, 2000). These employees tend to perceive situational forces (e.g., supervisory directives) as fixed (Crant, 2000) and exhibit maintenance-oriented agency (Xu et al., 2019). Individuals with low proactive personality are more externally motivated and have higher image enhancement motives, i.e., seek approval from others (Parker et al., 2019). Therefore, they usually behave in ways that show alignment with the "business as usual" of the organization rather than actively seeking improvements and innovations (Alikaj et al., 2023).

We expect that employees should show different levels of submission in reaction to PSS depending on their level of proactive personality. Specifically, employees with high proactive personality are less sensitive to external validation and have lower image enhancement motives because of their inner tendency to be a constructive force for change and improvement (Strauss et al., 2012). Research shows

that employees with high proactive personality feel that they have substantial control over their work (Li et al., 2010) and have confidence in their ability to affect positive change in their environment (Alikaj et al., 2021) even without the support of their leaders (Li et al., 2010). The centrality of work to proactive individuals' identity means that they prioritize meaningful contribution over relational harmony (McCormick et al., 2019). Their learning orientation leads them to view supervisor support as information for improvement rather than as a directive for compliance (Parker, 2007; Wang et al., 2017). This suggests that proactive employees, in contrast with employees low in proactive personality, should be more likely to interpret PSS as contextual cues signalling that proactivity is expected and valued within the situation (Parker, 2007; Wang et al., 2017). Prior research demonstrates that in favourable leadership situations, proactive individuals are more likely to challenge the status quo (Fuller and Marler, 2009), which includes expressing their personal opinions (Seibert et al., 2001) and engaging in constructive dissent (Miceli et al., 2012). Therefore, we argue:

*H3a: Proactive personality moderates the positive relationship between PSS and employees' submissive behaviours, such that this relationship is weaker for employees high in proactive personality than for employees low in proactive personality.*

Finally, we propose that proactive personality moderates the indirect relationship between PSS and employees' submissive behaviour through organizational pride. While both high and low proactive employees may experience pride from PSS, their behavioural responses should reflect the self-regulatory capacities and status sensitivity inherent in proactive personality (Parker et al., 2019). Specifically, for employees low in proactive personality, pride derived from PSS should lead to greater

submission, as their reliance on external validation and need for approval make them more inclined to respond with compliance-based behaviours such as submission (Parker et al., 2019; Strauss and Parker, 2018). These employees are thus more likely to view submissive behaviour as an appropriate means of expressing organizational pride and maintaining their position within established hierarchies (Li et al., 2015; Miceli et al., 2012). In contrast, employees high in proactive personality possess a stronger understanding of how status shapes organizational effectiveness (Parker et al., 2019). They are likely to perceive submissive behaviour as counterproductive, recognizing that it may undermine their credibility, weaken their influence within key social networks, and reduce their role as agents of change (Li et al., 2015; Whiting et al., 2008). Proactive employees engage in strategic behavioural differentiation, deliberately choosing actions that preserve their influence and long-term impact (Parker et al., 2019). Consequently, they are more likely to respond to organizational pride with assertive, improvement-oriented behaviours aligned with their proactive goals. Therefore, proactive personality is expected to weaken the positive indirect effect of PSS on submissive behaviour via pride, as highly proactive employees prioritize change enactment over hierarchical conformity.

*H3b: Proactive personality moderates the positive relationship between PSS and employees' submissive behaviours via pride in the organization, such that this relationship is weaker for employees high in proactive personality than for employees low in proactive personality.*



## Methodology

### Sample and Procedure

We invited several organizations operating in Portugal to participate in our study, asking their representatives for permission to collect data. Two sets of questionnaires were used in the study: one for subordinates and another for their immediate supervisors. Each questionnaire was coded in advance with a researcher-assigned identification number in order to match employees' responses with their immediate supervisors' evaluations. The research assistants contacted the subordinates first. If the subordinates agreed to participate, they then asked the immediate supervisor if he or she were willing to participate. If both were willing to participate the research assistants administered the subordinate survey and the supervisor evaluation form in person in order to guarantee confidentiality. We delivered 1122 surveys, from which 640 employee-supervisor dyads were returned (response rate of 57%).

After deletion of respondents who returned incomplete questionnaires (only for the variables of our research model) and/or failed the attention checks, the final sample comprised 558 employee-supervisor dyads (response rate of 50% of the original participants approached). Regarding demographics, 54% were female, and the average age was 40.45 years ( $SD=9.75$ ); for highest educational level, 31% had completed high-school and 50% had completed a college degree or higher (i.e., Masters). Participants' organizational tenure average was 12.31 years ( $SD= 9.63$ ) and the average tenure with their current supervisor was 4.80 years ( $SD=4.50$ ). For supervisors, 59% were male and the average age was 44.19 ( $SD=8.76$ ). Regarding their highest educational level, 55% had completed a college degree. Supervisor's tenure

with the organization was 16.56 years ( $SD=9.29$ ). Participants belong to organizations operating in different sectors: 23% in education, 24% in healthcare, 20% in finance and banking, 15% in industry, and 17% in customer service. With respect to organizational size, 28% of our sample came from organizations with fewer than 10 employees, 28% from organizations with between 10 and 100 employees, and 44% from organizations with more than 100 employees.

### **Measures**

The employees assessed the perceived supervisor support, pride in organization, and proactive personality. Each direct supervisor rated their employees' submissive behaviours. Participants rated their agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree).

***Perceived Supervisor Support.*** To measure perceived supervisor support we followed the procedures of earlier research (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2002; Rhoades et al. 2001) and adapted the eight items of the perceived organizational support scale of Eisenberger et al. (2002), replacing the word “organization” with “supervisor”. A sample item is: “My supervisor cares about my general satisfaction at work”. Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

***Pride in the Organization.*** To assess pride in organization we used the six items of Tyler and Blader (2002). A sample item is: “I am proud to tell my friends that I belong to my organization”. Cronbach’s alpha was .81.

***Proactive Personality.*** To measure proactive personality we used the ten-item scale developed by Bateman and Crant (1993). A sample item is: “If I see something I don’t like, I fix it”. Cronbach’s alpha was .78

**Submissive behaviours.** To measure submissive behaviours we followed the recommendations of Petersen and Dietz (2008) and adapted the Submissiveness to Organizational Authority Scale (SOA) developed by Dezoort and Roskos-Ewoldsen (1997). Supervisors rated employees' submissive behaviours using the five most representative items (i.e., with the highest factor loadings) from the ten-item SOA. Because these items were assessed by the supervisor in relation to the employee, we adapted the five items of this measure to depict their assessment of that employee's behaviour. For example, in the original measure, a sample item is: "I always obey my manager", which we adapted to "This employee always obeys me". Cronbach's alpha was .84

**Control Variables.** Following the recommendations of Becker et al. (2016) we selected control variables that were theoretically or empirically correlated with our outcome variables, thereby avoiding erroneous inferences. We controlled for tenure with supervisor (measured in years) and size of the organization (measured in number of employees as reported in the organizations' annual report). Tenure with supervisor has been consistently associated with the likelihood of employees expressing their own views (Davidson et al., 2017). Moreover, the size of a person's in-group positively affects his/her perceived diffusion of responsibility of his/her actions (Le Pine and Van Dyne, 1998) and increases or reduces conformity (Bond, 2005).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Measurement Model

Means, standard deviations, variable intercorrelations, and scale reliabilities ( $\alpha$ ) are shown in Table 1.

--- Insert table 1 about here ---

### **Measurement Model, Convergent and Discriminant Validity**

To assess our model fit and determine the distinctiveness of the constructs, we conducted confirmatory factorial analysis with Mplus 7 including four factors: PSS, pride in organization, proactive personality, and submissive behaviours. Table 2 provides information regarding the following indices: chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). The results indicate an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 (361) = 642.479$ ; CFI = .92; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .049; SRMR = .066) and fit the data better than the nested models, supporting the distinctiveness of constructs and our measurement model.

In addition, we examined in detail the divergent validity using two complementary indices: maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV). Table 3 shows that both indices are below .50, which is the threshold (Hair et al., 2019) and confirms that constructs are distinct from each other and do not share a substantial amount of variance. Concerning convergent validity, average variance explained (AVE) displays values near 50% for three constructs. The value for proactive personality is low (27%), but is nevertheless higher than the average shared variance, thereby minimizing concerns.

--- Insert table 2 and 3 about here ---

### **Hypotheses Testing**

To test the proposed model (Figure 1) we used bootstrapping analysis (SPSS macro, PROCESS, model 15; Hayes, 2012), as it avoids statistical power problems

resulting from asymmetric and other non-normal sampling distributions due to the test of indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2004). Table 4 reports the main results of bootstrapping analysis.

---Insert table 4 about here---

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived supervisor support would be positively associated with submissive behaviours. Contrary to our predictions we did not find support for this relationship ( $B = -.02$ ; 95% CI =  $[-.13; .09]$ ), and thus H1 was not supported. Hypothesis 2 proposed that pride in organization would mediate the positive relationship between perceived supervisor support and submissive behaviours. Consistent with our expectations we found that perceived supervisor support was positively associated with pride in organization ( $B = .33$ ; 95% CI =  $[.26; .39]$ ), which in turn was positively associated with submissive behaviours ( $B = .12$ , 95% CI =  $[.01; .24]$ ). The indirect effect (Model 4 of PROCESS) of perceived supervisor support on submissive behaviours via pride in the organization was also significant ( $B = .04$ ; 95% CI =  $[.01; .08]$ ). Thus, H2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that proactive personality would moderate the positive relationship between perceived supervisor support and submissive behaviours, such that this relationship will be weaker for employees high in proactive personality. Our results supported our predictions ( $B = -.25$ ; 95% CI =  $[-.44; -.06]$ ). We further explored the nature of the interaction by estimating the simple slopes using the procedures recommended by Cohen et al. (2003). Figure 2 depicts the perceived supervisor support-submissiveness to authority relationship for high proactive personality (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low proactive personality (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean). Simple slope analysis showed that the

relationship between PSS and submissiveness was negative when proactive personality was high ( $t(557) = -2.02, p < .05$ ) and non-significant when proactive personality was low ( $t(557) = 1.14, p > .05$ ). As expected, the difference between slopes was significant ( $t(557) = -2.51, p < .05$ ), thus supporting H3a.

Finally, in Hypothesis 3b we anticipated that proactive personality would moderate the relationship between perceived supervisor support and submissiveness, via pride in organization. We did not find a significant interaction between pride in organization and proactive personality ( $B = .12$ ; 95% CI =  $[-.12; .36]$ ). Moreover, the indirect effect also included zero ( $B = .03$ ; 95% CI =  $[-.04; .12]$ ) and was thus non-significant. Taken together, H3b was not supported.

--- Insert figure 2 about here ---

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how and when employees' submissive behaviours emerge from positive leadership situations. To do so we developed a framework based on the Relational Model of Authority (RMA; Tyler and Lind, 1992). Following the resource perspective of RMA, we predicted that PSS should be positively associated with employees' submissive behaviours. Moreover, and based on the identity perspective advanced by the RMA, we expected that pride in the organization should mediate this relationship. We also posited that both the direct and indirect (i.e., via pride) associations between PSS and submissive behaviour should be weaker for employees with high proactive personality.

Our findings suggest that PSS increases employee submissive behaviours via greater pride in organization, but not directly. Moreover, proactive personality is a moderator of the direct relationship between PSS and submissiveness, such that for

employees high in proactive personality this relationship becomes negative (while non-significant for low proactive personality). We did not find support for our mediated moderation hypothesis.

### **Theoretical contributions**

Our study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we advance knowledge on the relational nature of submissive behaviours by demonstrating how a positive leadership situation (i.e., PSS) might lead to employee submissive behaviour. In line with the RMA, our findings suggest that PSS leads employees to behave submissively via the enacted pride in the organization. We contribute to the literature on submissiveness at the workplace by demonstrating that these behaviours are not only an outcome of undermining leadership situations but also potentially of positive leadership behaviours. This expands research in the field by showing that submissiveness is not only used as a strategy to cope with toxic leadership situations, but it might also derive from employees' perceptions that their supervisor is entitled to be obeyed (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2018).

Second, contrary to our expectations, we did not find a direct relationship between PSS and submissive behaviours. This finding in some ways supports previous research on submissiveness following the RMA, which suggests that identity concerns outweigh resource concerns. For example, Tyler (1997; Study 4) showed that employees who perceived their supervisors as attentive to their needs, opinions, and rights were more likely to voluntarily accept decisions and comply with rules than those who saw their supervisors as merely instrumental (i.e., competent but primarily following organizational rules). Similarly, Kanat-Maymon et al. (2018) found that employees who perceived their supervisors as adopting an autonomy-supportive

motivating style were more inclined to defer to their authority (conceptualized as perceived authority legitimacy) than those who saw their supervisors as relying on external controls such as incentives, sanctions, or surveillance. Overall, our findings for H1 support the notion that the identity perspective (tested in H2) offers greater explanatory power for submissiveness (Tyler, 1997). Importantly, this does not imply that the resource-based perspective should be dismissed. Our study assessed only one form of resource (i.e., social support) and while supportive cues are important (Tyler, 1997), other instrumental leadership characteristics (e.g., perceived competence) may also shape employees' perceptions of whether authority should be obeyed. Furthermore, individual motivations related to specific resources (e.g., their perceived favourability) may influence the extent to which supervisors are seen as legitimate authorities (Tyler, 1997, p. 325). We encourage future research to extend our model by incorporating this perspective.

Third, our finding that pride in the organization mediates the PSS-submissive behaviour relationship, provides support for the social identity mechanism predicted in the relational model. In line with the theory, we demonstrate that employees' assessment of their social status (i.e., pride in the organization) mediates their evaluations of the actions of the supervisor with their submissive behaviours. This finding is aligned with earlier research demonstrating that prouder employees are more likely to engage in actions that help the organization achieve its goals, such as satisfying the requests and orders of their supervisor (Tyler and Blader, 2002) and refraining from those that would harm their functioning. This expands the field of employee submissive behaviours beyond the theorizing under the social exchange



(Blau, 1964), conservation of resources theory (Hofboll, 2018), and self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2011).

Fourth, our study also advances a boundary condition for the PSS-submissiveness relationship. We found that the relationship between PSS and submissive behaviours was weaker for individuals with high proactive personality. This finding is aligned with the theorizing that proactive individuals should interpret supervisor support as permission or encouragement to express their proactivity (i.e., challenge the status quo), rather than submitting to the supervisor's orders and requests without questioning. Also, this result positions proactive personality as an important safeguard, thus providing valuable information for general managers (as described in the next section).

Contrary to our expectations, we did not find support for the moderating effect of proactive personality on the indirect relationship between PSS and submissive behaviour via organizational pride. A possible explanation may reside in how individuals respond to organizational pride, which suggests an interesting area for future inquiry. Specifically, although we theorized that low proactive individuals would be more inclined to express pride through submissive behaviours due to their greater reliance on external validation and sensitivity to hierarchical norms (Parker et al., 2019; Strauss et al., 2012), it is possible that pride did not evoke strong enough motivational cues in our sample to translate into overt behavioural responses. Some scholars suggest that low proactive individuals may avoid taking clear action even when experiencing positive affect, opting instead for passivity or quiet compliance that may not be captured through submissiveness *per se* (Crant, 2000; Fuller et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2019). Moreover, for high proactive individuals, our theoretical model proposed that

organizational pride would reinforce assertive, change-oriented behaviours, making submissiveness less likely. Yet, some research also suggests that proactive employees can engage in contextually adaptive behaviours, including strategic deference, when doing so serves longer-term goals or preserves influence within hierarchical structures (Bolino et al., 2013; Li et al., 2010). Therefore, in contexts where pride is strongly linked to group identity or shared organizational values, even proactive individuals may exhibit cooperative behaviours that do not immediately align with their agentic tendencies (Grant and Ashford, 2008). Thus, rather than viewing submissiveness as inherently counter to proactivity, it may sometimes be interpreted as a deliberate, situationally appropriate response aligned with broader relational or political considerations. We advise future research to explore these possibilities.

Finally, our study also adds to the literature about the effects of PSS. While earlier research has consistently stressed the positive benefits of PSS for employees and organizations (Ng and Sorensen, 2008), our study cautions that it might also lead to undesirable outcomes (e.g., Li et al., 2022) such as submissive behaviours. It is important to stress that, as mentioned in the literature review section, the effects of submissive behaviours are paradoxical. By revealing that PSS should lead employees to behave submissively, our study stresses that these leadership behaviours should be used with additional attention by managers and organizations.

### **Practical Implications**

This study also provides implications for managerial practice. First, managers should be aware of the potential double-edged sword of support. We acknowledge that supervisor support makes a strong contribution to a positive and productive workplace (Vandenberghe, et al., 2019), and to some extent obedience is also important for

organizational functioning (Eisenberger, et al., 2001). Nevertheless, managers should understand that support might bring unwanted effects such as submissive behaviours. This recognition is important because prior research has shown that submissive behaviour is associated with heightened unethical behaviour (Petersen and Dietz, 2008; Li et al., 2022) and hinders the innovative performance of organizations (Chang et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2013). We therefore advise leaders that, beyond providing support to their employees, they should strategically determine when support is necessary and engage in such behaviours coupled with other actions that stimulate the proactive nature of their employees – such as enabling and empowering employees to make decisions, implementing actions without direct supervision or intervention, or stimulating employees through intellectually exciting ideas. In line with this, organizations may gain from implementing training programs aimed at enhancing employees' proactive behaviours. Although proactivity is often regarded as a relatively stable individual trait, empirical evidence suggests that it can be cultivated through targeted training and development interventions (e.g., Strauss and Parker, 2018).

Moreover, and recognizing that some individuals are more likely to behave submissively than others (i.e., those with low proactive personality) managers could also minimize the negative effects of submissiveness by assigning highly proactive employees to cross-functional areas of the organization (e.g., product development, strategic planning, or innovation and change management) that necessarily require personal initiative and critical thinking. These employees are more likely to interpret a supportive environment as an opportunity to express their proactivity (Wang et al., 2017) rather than merely pleasing their leader.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our study is not without limitations. First, we obtained the data at one point in time which limits causal assertions and raises endogeneity issues (Antonakis, et al., 2010). These concerns are mitigated by the use of different sources of data (i.e., employee and direct supervisor) and the inclusion of relevant control variables (tenure with supervisor and size of the organization) correlated with our dependent variables. We also included a common latent factor to assess the presence of common method bias by loading all items on this factor (Podsakoff et al., 2012). As expected, the fit shows a slight improvement ( $\chi^2_{(359)} = 587.631$ ; CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .046; SRMR = .063), but CMV accounted for 13.7% percent of the total variance, which is below the 25% threshold (Williams et al., 1989). While experimental designs are the only way to truly establish causality (Podsakoff, et al. 2012), this approach may not be feasible in terms of manipulating proactive personality as this is a relatively stable individual trait. Future research should use a multi-methods approach to reduce the risk of common source (e.g., surveys and experience-sampling methods) and use time-lagged designs to confirm and expand our model.

Second, while the aim of our study was to explore whether submissiveness may also arise from positive leadership behaviours, further research is needed to examine additional mechanisms and boundary conditions that may shape the relationship between PSS and employee submissiveness. One such boundary condition may be culture. As Chen et al. (2009) argue, variations in power distance can influence the extent to which employees comply with supervisors' directives. In low power distance cultures, hierarchical authority is often questioned, whereas in high power distance cultures, it is more likely to be accepted and legitimized. We acknowledge that our study was conducted in Portugal, a country with a relatively high Power Distance Index

score of 63 (Hofstede, 1991). This score reflects a cultural context in which hierarchical structures are accepted and inequalities in power distribution are expected and tolerated, which may have influenced how employees interpret supervisor support and how proactive personality is expressed. We recommend that future studies replicate this research across diverse cultural contexts to better understand the influence of power distance in shaping these dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

This study expanded our knowledge about the origins of employee submissive behaviour by demonstrating that it also emerges from positive leadership actions (i.e., PSS). We highlight that submissive behaviours are a relational phenomenon that entail several nuances that are still to be discovered. Also, our study stresses that positive leadership behaviours, such as PSS, might also lead to undesirable outcomes. This should call the attention of managers to the strategic nature of social support. We hope that our research stimulates more research in this field and expands our understanding of the dynamics underlying submissive behaviour in the workplace.

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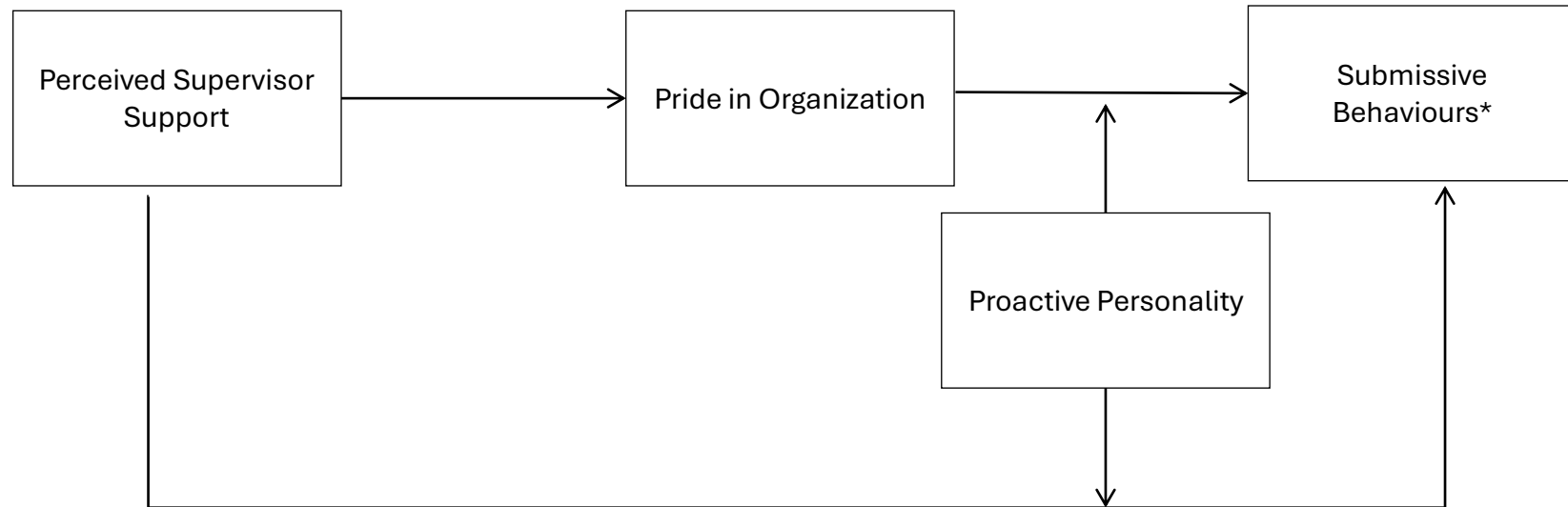
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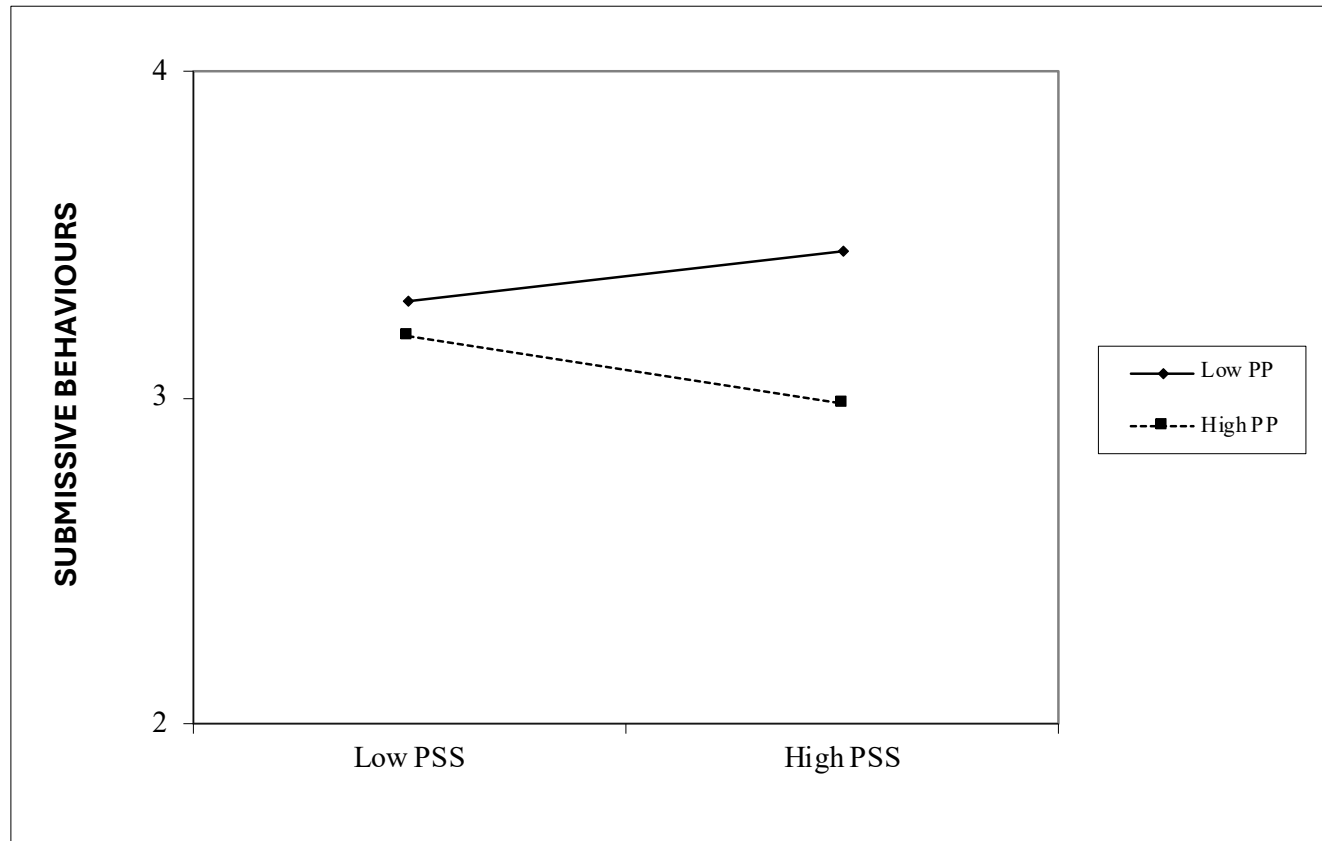
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**Figure 1.** *Research Model*



\* Rated by the direct supervisor

**Figure 2.** *Interaction Plot of the PSS X PP effect on Submissive Behaviours*



**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Cronbach's Alphas*<sup>a, b</sup>

Variable	Mean <sup>b</sup>	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Perceived Supervisor Support	3.82	.77	(.87)					
2.Pride in Organization	3.87	.75	.37**	(.81)				
3.Proactive Personality	3.69	.49	.24**	.42**	(.78)			
4.Submissive Behaviours	3.13	.89	.01	.08*	-.10*	(.84)		
5.Tenure with supervisor	4.89	4.57	-.05	.04	-.09*	-.10*	--	
6. Size of the Organization	2917.61	4118.58	-.16**	-.20**	-.05	-.20**	.13	--

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Cronbach's alpha appears in parentheses along the main diagonal

<sup>b</sup> 5-point scales, except for *Tenure with supervisor*, which was measured in years and *Size of the organization* measured in number of employees

\*\* p<.01; \*p<.05



**Table 2.** *Confirmatory Factorial Analysis Results*

<b>Model</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>df</b>	<b><math>\Delta\chi^2</math></b>	<b>CFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>	<b>SRMR</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>
Hypothesized four-factor model	642.479	361		.92	.91	.066	.049
Three-factor model <sup>a</sup>	1113.151	364	470.672	.78	.75	.088	.080
Two-factor model <sup>b</sup>	1380.405	366	737.926	.70	.66	.101	.093
One-factor model <sup>c</sup>	1735.487	367	1093.018	.59	.55	.117	.108

**Notes:**<sup>a</sup>equating PSS and pride in organization in the same factor; proactive personality; and submissive behaviours<sup>b</sup>equating PSS, pride in organization and proactive personality; and submissive behaviours<sup>c</sup>all constructs in the same factor

**Table 3.** *Reliability (Cronbach's alpha), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), Average Shared Variance (ASV)*

Construct	Reliability		Convergent Validity	Discriminant Validity	
	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>CR</i>		<i>MSV</i>	<i>ASV</i>
Perceived Supervisor Support	.87	.88	47.8%	.35	.20
Pride in Organization	.81	.82	45.4%	.41	.29
Proactive Personality	.78	.78	26.7%	.41	.25
Submissive Behaviours	.84	.82	48.2%	.12	.08

**Table 4.** *Bootstrapping Results for Submissive Behaviours (Model 15)*

Predictors	Outcomes							
	Pride in Organization (Mediator)				Submissive Behaviours (Dependent Variable)			
	B	SE	t	95% CI	B	SE	t	95%CI
<i>Control Variable</i>								
Tenure with supervisor	.01	.01	1.68	[-.00; .02]	-.01	.01	-1.64	[-.03;.00]
Size of the organization	.00	.00	-4.32	[.00;.00]	.00	.00	-3.10	[.00;.00]
<i>Main Effects</i>								
Perceived Supervisor Support	.27	.04	7.43**	[.20;.35]	-.02	.05	-.33	[-.13;.09]
Proactive Personality					-.30	.09	-3.34**	[-.47; -.12]
<i>Mediator</i>								
Pride in Organization					.18	.06	2.66**	[.05;.31]
<i>Interaction terms</i>								
Perceived Supervisor Support x Proactive Personality					-.24	.10	-2.51*	[-.43; -.05]
<i>Mediated moderation</i>								
Pride in Organization x Proactive Personality					.12	.12	.97	[-.12;.36]

Notes: N=558; Tabled values are unstandardized regression coefficients \*\* p<.01; \*p<.05; CI= Confidence Intervals