

Understanding the Emergence of Ill-being at Work in a Post-colonial Context: A Qualitative Analysis

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Little is known about how ill-being at work is produced in a post-colonial context. In this study, we explore this process through the lens of Critical Theory, examining the interplay between heteronomous obedience and the politicization of belonging in a multinational company in Pakistan. Drawing on data from 33 interviews, we trace the production of ill-being as employees navigate pressures to conform via (i) mimicking behaviours, (ii) gendering obedience and (iii) concealing their values and identities. Our findings reveal that ill-being is shaped by the hybrid dynamics of global corporate progressiveness and deeply ingrained local ‘Seth’ culture. This negotiation results in internal conflicts, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation, particularly as socio-cultural and gender norms complicate belonging in the workplace. By integrating our findings with the literature, we offer new insights into the production of ill-being in non-Western settings and highlight future research directions.

Introduction

The impact of ill-being at work has long been an important line of inquiry in management research (Davenport and Daellenbach, 2011; Nayani *et al.*, 2022). Ill-being has been explored as the absence of well-being, be it psychological and/or physical (Watson *et al.*, 2023). Previous research has focused on examining various organizational factors, such as organizational management, physical working conditions, unequal treatment according to social status, and lack of autonomy (Pacheco and Ferreira, 2020), as contributors to employee ill-being. However, the process through which ill-being at work is produced (Wright and Silard, 2021) has been theoretically and empirically underexplored. Therefore, the overreaching aim of this article is to investigate the pro-

cess through which ill-being comes into existence, and what outcomes this might entail for employees.

Specifically, past management research has directly and indirectly linked ill-being to belonging at work (Bartels *et al.*, 2006; Hershcovis *et al.*, 2017; Won, Wolters and Mueller, 2018). Belonging, as a ‘sense of ease between one’s values and the surroundings in contact with those values’ (May, 2011, p. 368), is often politicized, engendering ill-being by making individuals vulnerable to manipulation (Lindebaum, 2017; Mao and Xue, 2022). Therefore, the politicisation of belonging prompts the exploitation of individuals to act against their preferred ways of feeling, thinking and behaving. According to Fromm (1981/2010, p. 5), this exploitation amounts to submission through heteronomous obedience, or ‘obedience to a person, institution or power ... the abdication of [one’s] autonomy and the acceptance of a foreign will ... in place of [one’s] own’. Heteronomous obedience thus becomes imperative because economic necessity often implies that, for a functioning society, individuals must behave in ways that correspond to them being able to fulfil the role they have been allocated by society (Fromm, 1941/2011). Thus, individuals’ sense of belonging comes at the expense of giving up their self to become the person they believe they are expected

Note: We herewith certify that this essay represents original and independent scholarship. That is, generative AI was not used in the idea-generating phase of this essay; nor was it used to assist the writing or editing of this essay. We observe with concern that many journal publishers undermine the meaning of the term ‘original scholarship’ by allowing the use of generative AI in the research process, while the actual enforceability of relevant policies is low.

to be at work, and a lack of belonging engenders ill-being.

In addressing the production of ill-being, we locate our empirical analysis within the contemporary literature that highlights a growing concern about how localized work environments and managerial strategies exacerbate stress and dissatisfaction among employees (Tessema *et al.*, 2022). The empirical context of our study is a post-colonial one because academic discourse on workplace ill-being has been dominated by Western conceptualizations, which have not captured the unique challenges faced by employees in post-colonial contexts (Watson *et al.*, 2023). This dominance has resulted in an inherently limited view of the contextual factors that may explain variations in the production of ill-being (Khan and Koshul, 2011), offering little more than teasing out the boundary conditions of mainstream Western conceptualizations of workplace ill-being. Our paper aligns with these broader discussions of how Western neoliberal policies and practices contribute to the erosion of workplace well-being (Morris *et al.*, 2023) and its subsequent effects on mental health through ill-being production in the Global South (Muzio, 2022).

We connect Fromm's thinking on heteronomous obedience and navigating belonging at work to the post-colonial context of 'ProCare' (a pseudonym for a multinational EU-based cosmetics company) operating in Pakistan. Fromm's (1955/2001) sustained interest in studying the basic need of humans to belong and its associated submission to an external authority through heteronomous obedience is especially plausible in a post-colonial work context. This is because Fromm's (1955/2001) ideas provide a framework for analysing the pursuit of belonging and the consequences of external authority in a post-colonial setting by shedding light on the complex relationship between colonial legacies and ill-being. A colonial perspective highlights deep-seated power structures that shape boundaries of belonging, impacting individuals' mental and physical health (Jhatal, Cornelius and Wallace, 2014). In this way, ProCare provides a post-colonial context in which to study the ways, according to Prasad (2014, p. 235), 'control, exploitation and patterns of domination and submission are operationalised'. With these insights, our article answers the following two research questions. (i) How do workers navigate the interplay between the politicization of belonging and heteronomous obedience? (ii) How and why is ill-being produced as an outcome of this interplay?

Our study makes two key theoretical contributions. First, we theorize experiences of ill-being at work as contemporary manifestations of historically sedimented, unequal social structures rooted in a colonial past (Śliwa *et al.*, 2024). Here, ill-being is a specific state of micro-political struggle, where the choice of being a productive member within a post-colonial capitalist

society is much preferred over one's flourishing (as per Fromm, 1941/2011). Pakistan's emphasis on productive behaviour is driven by a desire for higher status, privilege, and career advancement amid political turmoil and rising unemployment (Ahmed, 2020). These factors combine to foster ill-being, entailing conditions of persistent imperatives to behave against one's preferred ways of feeling, thinking and behaving. Second, our findings are largely incongruous with the Western scholarly conceptualization of ill-being that has been propagated to date, where contextual cases of ill-being have been bracketed off (Sayed and Frenkel, 2024). Our analysis suggests that individuals in post-colonial work contexts cope with ill-being in ways that are rooted in cultural norms, globalization and internal socio-political factors that challenge Western ideas of what constitutes effective workplace support and intervention.

In what follows, we first briefly review research related to ill-being at work. Second, we use Fromm to outline how heteronomous obedience and politicization of belonging interrelate (also with a view to the post-colonial context). We then outline the methodology and proceed to present our findings. We close with a discussion on the practical ramifications and limitations and foreshadow avenues for future research.

Ill-being at work: The neglect of a contextual, post-colonial response

Ill-being is defined as a state of distress, discomfort or dissatisfaction experienced by individuals in their workplace (Danna and Griffin, 1999). Within organizational psychology, Gill (2019) posits ill-being to be an individualized, often moralized and subjective response of workers, resulting in responsabilizing organizational subjects for their health or lack thereof (Baran, Rogelberg and Clausen, 2016). Researchers have broadened ill-being to a range of domains beyond individual subjectivity to incorporate environmental, geographic and socio-economic forces (McNaught, 2011). In economics, there is a focus on economic performance, particularly how Western capitalism leads to ill-being (Fisher, 2009/2022; Fleming, 2015; Watson, 2021). In this regard, Peccei, Van de Voorde and Van Veldhoven (2013) have used the happy-productive worker hypothesis, positing that ill-being is an outcome of organizations aiming to conflate worker happiness with increased worker productivity. Combining economics and sociology, Purser's (2019) work on mindfulness as a practice shows how ensuring well-being was a form of 'capitalist spirituality', adding to discourses on 'corporate wellness' (Harvey, 2019). Research has also elaborated on how factors such as stress (Hunt *et al.*, 2018), depression and loneliness (Wright and Silard, 2021) and frustration (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014) can be both causes and

outcomes of ill-being, and feed into each other reciprocally. However, we argue that, irrespective of research on causes or outcomes, conceptualizations of ill-being at work often assume that a Western understanding of ill-being extends to non-Western post-colonial contexts. Additionally, the process engendering ill-being remains somewhat underexplored in the management and organization literature (Elmholdt, Elmholdt and Haahr, 2021; Smith and Ulus, 2020). Western conceptualizations of workplace well-being, when rooted in individualism, meritocracy, and the separation of personal and professional spheres, hold value in the Global North by assuming a uniformity of experiences that do not account for the socio-cultural and historical specificities of post-colonial contexts (Wickert *et al.*, 2024). According to Crafford (2022), this allocative view to ill-being complicates the Western focus on individual flourishing and autonomy. In countries such as Pakistan, and broadly extending to the Global South, workplace dynamics are deeply influenced by hierarchical structures, patriarchal norms and collectivist values. The intersection of traditional values with modern corporate practices creates a complex environment, where well-being is tied to social belonging and compliance, rather than to personal fulfilment, limiting the applicability of Western models in non-Western contexts (Puplampu and Lewis, 2021). In non-Western contexts, socio-organizational factors, including disparities in educational background, limited welfare support, uneven regional and economic development and precarious employment conditions, contribute to ill-being at work by creating barriers to career advancement, economic stability and overall well-being for workers. Additionally, post-colonial contexts are shaped by the intersectionality between historical, cultural and socio-political factors (Jack *et al.*, 2011; Prasad and Qureshi, 2017), which become crucial in justifying the process of ill-being production, as well as its associated outcomes.

Understanding Fromm and ill-being in a post-colonial context

Central to Fromm's (1981/2010) analysis of obedience is his conceptualization of heteronomous obedience – the abdication of individual autonomy – as defined above. Later studies have examined the relationship between obedience and susceptibility of individuals to be exploited through obedience (Bocchiaro and Zamperini, 2012; Milgram, 1974), showing that individuals abdicate their autonomy in the face of a perceived authority. Furthermore, obedience at work has direct linkages with workplace control, ranging from a prescribed set of emotional displays (Fineman, 1983) to the failure to display desired characteristics, which can threaten belonging at work (Fleming and Spicer, 2008).

Fromm and Xirau (1968) argue that socio-economic factors, for instance structural gender discrimination, labour exploitation, economic inequality and limited social protection (Croucher, 2018; Visser *et al.*, 2017), organize workplaces around certain characteristics, where the need to belong compels individuals to navigate belonging in a variety of unhealthy ways. Examples are succumbing to authoritarian leaders (Fromm, 1941/2011) or commodification of the self. In terms of the latter, Fromm (1955/2001) highlights that individuals experience their behaviours and thoughts as commodities to be exchanged to fit into the social machine that is industrial capitalism. In the Pakistani context, this capitalism is influenced by a mixture of traditional and modern economic ideologies. These include elements of state capitalism as well as neoliberal capitalism categorized by market-driven policies, privatization, hierarchical structures and familial ties (Brown, 2016). Through a combination of these factors, employees may experience ill-being owing to a heightened susceptibility to obedience by undermining worker autonomy (Shanahan and Smith, 2021), leading to excessive workloads, discrimination and distress (Grandey, Rupp and Brice, 2015). Obedience, suggests Fromm (1941/2011), is then key to eliminating the sense of isolation that humans feel through the prioritization of deference and conformity to authority. Thus, it becomes evident that the dynamics of obedience intersect with broader socio-political processes, shaping individuals' sense of belonging and feelings of ill-being within the workplace.

Politicization of belonging and heteronomous obedience

The politicization of belonging demonstrates the tenacity of a powerful few to seek domination through the propagation of 'who belongs' into a monolithic 'we' (Halse, Black and Charles, 2018). Belonging cannot be explored without first exploring 'who' belongs vis-à-vis navigating the boundaries that exclude and/or include and that in doing so reinforce forms of subjugation (Lachmann, 2013; Youkhana, 2015). While the politicization of belonging testifies to the importance of examining contextual factors together, studying the interplay of the politicisation of belonging and heteronomous obedience tackles the implications around political projects of belonging in contemporary organizations. It is at this nexus that we see post-colonial conditions of social inequality and power asymmetries being used as exclusionary practices legitimizing obedience (Middleton, 2013). In post-colonial settings, individuals work in a brash and competitive environment (Smith and Ulus, 2020), leading to a reluctance amongst workers to challenge oppressive structures or advocate for workplace autonomy. The complex phenomenon wherein employees consciously engage in heteronomous obedience and refrain from resisting or contesting the

boundaries of belonging can be attributed to the fact that, within their socio-economic context, the available alternatives pose significantly greater risks to their well-being. Consequently, the abdication of their autonomy to an external authority becomes a more viable and less detrimental option. This interplay creates barriers to addressing and mitigating ill-being by inhibiting collective action, open dialogue and meaningful work practices.

Workplaces in Pakistan: A melting pot of elitism, Sethism and modernism

While Fromm's conception of obedience is rooted in European World War II reflections, obedience in South Asia emerged during the same time (around 1939) out of British colonization. Post-colonial thought has portrayed the West as progressive and the Global South as primitive (Hopkinson and Aman, 2019; Said, 1978/2003), and validating such a narrative has become a power resource and a source of obedience for those subjected to this power (Alcadipani and Caldas, 2012).

Created within the former British Indian colony, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan came into being in 1947. Pakistan has a population of 220 million people (99% Muslims), and a prominent enduring post-colonial legacy is the elite system, embedded through the 1858 British Raj. The elites in Pakistan today are 'those who have vastly disproportionate control over access to [economic and social] resources' (Khan, 2012, p. 362). Post-British rule belongs to the powerful military (which has ruled directly for half of its 74-year history), political dynasties and feudal lords (collectively constituting 1.1% of the population, owning 22% of arable farmland) (UNHDR, 2022). These elite groups, consuming 6% of the country's economic resources, play a central role in reinforcing class structures in Pakistan through 'elitism' – ways of living, socializing and working reminiscent of the British that colonized the country. Elitism in Pakistan influences hierarchical power dynamics in three ways. First, it reinforces the stratification of employment hierarchies by highlighting how middle-class citizens dominate moderately paid roles in post-colonial workplaces. The similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds of these citizens indicate their limited upward mobility, which sustains existing socio-economic inequalities. This pattern hinders efforts for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, maintaining the dominance of elites in multinational organizations. Second, elitism is evident in linguistic divisions, reinforcing social groupings and cultural norms (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). Third, the introduction of management education, particularly the MBA, reinforces colonial-era stratification (Abreu-Pederzini and Suárez-Barraza, 2019), as multinational corporations predominantly recruit from elite private business schools. This trend

persists, limiting individuals hired from lower socio-economic backgrounds or second-tier private business schools to a minority group (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021).

We also need to highlight aspects of modern workplaces and the localized other, namely, 'Seth' organizations in the context of Pakistan. In Pakistan, 'modern' workplaces, akin to Western multinational companies (MNCs), are in contrast to nationalized companies known as 'Seth' organizations, where 'Seth' conveys a patriarchal, exploitative and kinship-oriented mode of management without regard to human and gender rights (Khakwani and Case, 2012). The influence of Seth culture among the elite in Pakistan is significant, demonstrating a strong intersectionality between socioeconomic status and cultural norms. Higher management roles in MNCs are held by older individuals with previous experience in Seth organizations, characterized by a blend of authoritarian and bureaucratic management styles. This influences business practices, shaping attitudes towards hierarchy, gender (only 22% of women join the labour force) (Asian Development Bank, 2022), authority and obedience (Ahmad, Islam and Kaleem, 2021). The intersectionality between elitism and Sethism reinforces power dynamics, perpetuates stratification and influences decision-making processes at work.

'Sethism', carrying a pejorative connotation, portrays multinational firms as desirable, merging progress and affluence, while critiquing the perceived backwardness of Seth organizational culture, thus making multinational employment seem natural (Khilji, 2002). The 'modern' narrative encourages detachment from traditional Pakistani values, promoting the idea that adopting modern ways is a path to being a better Pakistani (Hopkinson and Aman, 2019). Such narratives of progress influence belonging, shaping behaviours and values, potentially compromising employee well-being in post-colonial Pakistan (Khilji, 2003). Given these characteristics in the Pakistani context, we re-iterate the need to investigate the process through which ill-being comes into existence as a result of the interplay between heteronomous obedience and navigating the politicization of belonging and what outcomes this might entail for employees.

Methods

Sample and context

The empirical setting for our research was ProCare (pseudonym), a European cosmetics multinational in Pakistan. Using purposive sampling, we collected data from participants at early- to mid-career management levels, as the need to belong is more distinct for these employees in comparison to senior-level employees (Otto *et al.*, 2017). The sample, accessed through the

first researcher's professional network, comprised 33 employees with 1–3 years of experience at ProCare and no prior MNC experience. They held graduate and/or postgraduate degrees from Pakistan (business, marketing, sales, finance and engineering). The participants were considered to be 'outsiders', based on either being among the minority of those hired from second-tier institutions or being among those who had studied at top-tier business schools through the national outreach program for underprivileged students. Hence, the findings mainly represent perspectives from individuals who can be categorized as a minority group within ProCare, not being considered elite owing to either their socio-economic and/or educational backgrounds.

ProCare, based in Europe but operating in Pakistan, navigates a complex heritage blending colonial and post-colonial influences alongside Islamic culture (Rakodi, 2016) and capitalist forces (Syed and Tariq, 2018). While ProCare has been publicly recognized for its strides in gender equality, particularly for promoting women in leadership, our analysis revealed that patriarchal structures were still deeply embedded within the organization. Ironically, these dynamics emerged as a persistent theme across our findings. This meant that the senior management transported connotations of a Seth culture into the management style (mixture of totalitarian and bureaucratic management style) (Mangi *et al.*, 2012). This mixture created ambiguity for employees navigating belonging through Fromm's concept of heteronomous obedience.

Procedure

Owing to the exploratory nature of this research, the primary method of data collection employed was semi-structured interviews, conducted over Skype with participants in Pakistan. The duration of the interviews amounted to 45–60 minutes on average. The medium of all interviews was English, with just a few Urdu words thrown into the conversation, for which translations are provided in our analysis. In the interviews, the participants were invited to share their experiences concerning navigating belonging at work and how that made them feel. An informal summary of the research was circulated using industry contacts by the first author. Before each interview, a participant information sheet along with a consent form was shared and had to be returned with participant signatures before the interview. Additionally, the consent forms contained an option to opt out of audio recording. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim following consent from the participant. In cases where participants opted out of audio recordings (2 out of 33), handwritten notes were taken by the first researcher. A summary of each interview was sent back to the participants, represent-

ing 'respondent feedback' (Bryman, 2016), and served to increase the trustworthiness of the data. No compensation was provided for participation. Data saturation (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968) was achieved in this study after the 28th interview. However, to confirm trustworthiness in the fact that data saturation had been achieved, a further five interviews were conducted and analysed, bringing the total number of interviews to 33 (see Table 1 for participants).

Data analysis

The epistemological lens through which this study is conducted is rooted in Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, which emphasizes examining power dynamics, social inequalities and emancipation within organizational settings (Morrow and Brown, 1994). The methodology reflects our intent to critique and uncover hidden forms of oppression and ill-being in the workplace. This perspective also aligns with our use of Template Analysis (King *et al.*, 2003), a form of thematic analysis that emphasizes the development of a coding template, usually based on a subset of data, which is then applied to further revise and refine data. Template Analysis (see also Brooks *et al.*, 2015) allows for a flexible yet structured approach (King, Brooks and Tabari, 2018) to analysing the complex socio-cultural and power relationships identified in the data, including in post-colonial and gendered contexts. Applying a critical epistemological lens to the empirical context of post-colonialism offered flexibility in understanding reality shaped over time by the 'congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors' (Lincoln, 1994, p. 110), which were perceived over time as (inappropriately) real.

In step 1 of the analysis, the first author familiarized herself with the data through a thorough reading of it. An initial coding template of 21 codes was defined using a subset of five interviews, which was a suitable criterion as they covered a good cross-section of employee experiences. The preliminary coding utilized a priori themes from the literature on Pakistan (e.g. high power distance, social stratification, gender discrimination) to understand obedience experiences. The first iteration condensed the codes to 13, focusing on the study's main objective. Subsequent iterations incorporated broader discussions, reducing codes to 10 and then 8, revealing ProCare's role in post-colonial politics and social stratification. Codes were grouped and refined iteratively based on similarities and relationships. Ultimately, a fourth and final analytical iteration culminated in the emergence of the final three themes: (i) mimicking the modern, (ii) gendering heteronomous obedience and (iii) concealing personality/character. These themes mutually inform how the process of ill-being comes into existence and with what outcomes, which were also emer-

Table 1. Participant information

Name	Job designation	Years at ProCare	Educational background	Key participant characteristics
Bakhtawar	Sales	3 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire, from a nationalized company; religious upbringing; having difficulty keeping up with elite requirements of dressing at work
Maha	HR	2 years	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Affluent household; modest cultural and religious values
Maazia	Marketing	3 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Rich socio-economic background
Benazir	HR	1 year	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Middle-class socio-economic status
Abrar	Marketing	3 years	Graduate degree from NAM ^a on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	From under-represented, marginalized, disadvantaged group
Abdullah	HR	2.5 years	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire from a Seth organization
Shanzay	Marketing	1.5 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Rich background
Morad	Finance	2 years	Graduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	Middle-class background
Ali	Marketing	1.5 years	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Affluent
Bilawal	HR	2.5 years	Graduate degree from NAM	Religious upbringing
Fatima	Marketing	4 months	Postgraduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	New entrant, from religiously marginalized group
Zaeem	Finance	8 months	Postgraduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	New entrant; economically low-income status
Asifa	Marketing	3 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Upper-middle class
Asad	Marketing	3 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Upper-middle class
Ujala	Sales	2 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Rich socio-economic background
Masooma	Social media marketing (SMM)	2 years	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire due to niche expertise in SMM at the time of hiring
Mohammad	Marketing	1.5 years	Postgraduate degree from a NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	Poor socio-economic status
Abrar	Marketing	2 years	Graduate degree from NAM	Middle-class, religious background
Rida	Social media marketing	5 months	Graduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	New entrant
Salman	Marketing	3 years	Graduate degree from NAM	Middle-class background
Samad	Corporate management	2 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Upper middle- class background
Umair	Sales	2.5 years	Postgraduate degree from second-tier private university	Lateral hire from fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), upper-middle class
Ahmed	Marketing	1.5 years	Graduate degree from second-tier private university	Lateral hire from Seth organization
Zaman	Sales	6 months	Graduate degree from a public university	Middle-class; lateral hire; ProCare provided him with economic stability
Sara	Marketing	10 months	Graduate degree from NAM	Rich but religious family background
Zaid	Sales	15 months	Postgraduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire; middle class
Omar	IT	2 years	Graduate degree from a public engineering university with predominantly technical skills	Lack of organizational skills of communication
Zara	Sales	1.5 years	Graduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire
Fahd	Finance	1 year	Graduate degree from a public engineering university; lack of exposure in public communication	Honors student in Dean's Honour List; upper-middle-class upbringing
Amir	Sales	2.5 years	Graduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	Poor socio-economic status
Hassan	Sales	10 months	Graduate degree from a private tier-two university	Middle class
Javeria	IT	14 months	Graduate degree from a public university	Lateral hire
Basit	Social media marketing	10 months	Graduate degree from NAM on national outreach program for underprivileged individuals	Belonged to upper-middle class but marginalized Islamic sect

^aNAM was a top-tier business school in Pakistan.

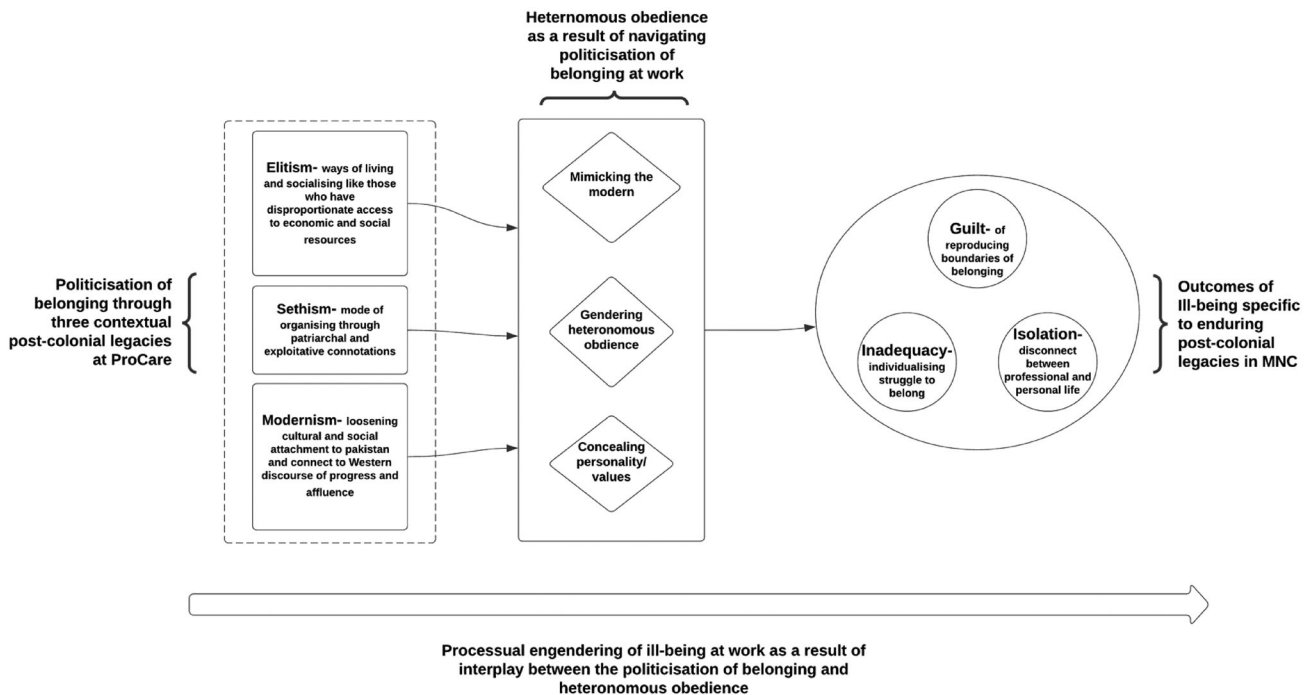


Figure 1. Ill-being at work: a micropolitical process at the intersection of politicization of belonging and heteronomous obedience

gent from the data. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings, while Figure 1 offers a process visualization of these findings. In addition, we undertook to manage researcher perceptions influencing the interpretation of data through the use of communicative and pragmatic validity (Sandberg, 2005) in an attempt to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Levitt *et al.*, 2018).

Within the data analysis, there were several issues of generative context worth addressing. First, although participants were informed about the research aim, no attempt was made to specifically relate all their comments to heteronomous obedience. Given that participants were recruited through the first author’s professional network, ethical considerations, including cultural sensitivity and participant hesitation to discuss this sensitive topic, were an initial concern. Here, the first author’s shared cultural context with participants enabled participant openness and the richness of data collected, prompting attention to power dynamics to ensure honest, comfortable sharing. Second, the first author’s positionality was essential as it shaped critical engagement with the data while also aiding in capturing the complexities of navigating belonging and obedience in a post-colonial context. With Pakistani origin, education and professional experience, the first author was familiar with the hierarchical, gendered and socio-economic stratification associated with MNCs, particularly their practice of hiring from elite institutions. This allowed for interpretation of participant narratives as an ‘insider’, where the first author understood references to terms such as ‘good breeding’, ‘gender in-

equality’, ‘emasculated’ and ‘class differences’. Furthermore, the first author’s positionality provided insights into the cross-cultural implications of findings, adding unique value to understanding how these results relate to broader management research on ill-being production.

Finally, in addressing author positionality during data analysis, it was important to acknowledge potential biases stemming from the first author’s personal and cultural background. The dual role of the first author, being both an insider and an outsider, required careful navigation (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This balancing act of insider–outsider positionality was crucial for maintaining a critical distance during data collection, managed through reflexive practices, such as maintaining a reflective journal and engaging in discussions with the second author (non-native to Pakistan) to mitigate subjectivity. Such an interpretive lens brought depth by capturing subtle cultural nuances, enriching the analysis but with the acknowledgement of potential constraints.

Findings

Our findings identified a two-part process, where the first part explicates the interplay between heteronomous obedience and navigating belonging, and the second part explicates how this interplay produces ill-being. Data analysis yielded three themes – (i) mimicking the ‘modern’, (ii) gendering heteronomous obedience and (iii) concealing personality/values – which then produce

Table 2. Summary of findings

Navigating the politicization of belonging	Interplay of obedience and politicized belonging	Mechanisms conveying heteronomous obedience	Examples	Engendered ill-being: through feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation
1. Desiring behaviours and lifestyles of the elite to overcome barriers where certain ways of being were associated with suitability to belong at the MNC, considered a beacon of 'modern'.	The need to belong acted as a disciplining mechanism. To belong, employees jumped through hoops where they 'mimicked' the 'modern', such as language and accents, lifestyle, etc.	Mimicking the 'modern'.	<p>'I didn't know what <i>linguine</i> was until we had it for lunch... I remember thinking out loud 'but these are noodles' and noticed my team passing looks at each other. That's when I knew I had to work on myself.' (Bilawal, HR)</p> <p>'[One has to] showcase a certain way of speaking and carrying oneself. It was not based on merit, rather based on judging whether an individual was of good "breeding", whatever that meant.' (Zaid, Sales)</p> <p>'I am that guy they give examples of. But then again, I've had to change a lot of who I was when I first started out.' (Umair, Sales)</p>	<p>Feelings of inadequacy. '[Not trying] to be posh kept me up at night, I was made to feel like I did wrong [by saying no to something I was expected to do] ... like maybe I wasn't seeing [the merit in] what others were doing' (Maazia, Marketing)</p> <p>Feelings of guilt. 'Our colonial history [and] love hate relationship with class difference created by those who ruled over us has created a sort of complex in the society. And that has been moved into the corporate world as well ... and we are the culprits as much as we are the victims ... we keep the wheel turning.' (Ahmed, Marketing)</p> <p>Feelings of isolation in personal lives. 'There was no way out because it [mimicking] either meant belonging, or [resisting and not belonging] feeling isolated at work but also in society ... we all know money is power; it is what gives you clout, what makes people around you respect you. Do we have a better choice?' (Mohammad, Marketing)</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

Navigating the politicization of belonging	Interplay of obedience and politicized belonging	Mechanisms conveying heteronomous obedience	Examples	Engendered ill-being: through feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation
<p>2. Stemming from the social structure of a patriarchal society, manifested through expectations for men to be aggressive and bossy and women to be silently tolerating. Rigid ideas on how genders should behave, where men are considered authority figures and women should fit into subordinate roles.</p>	<p>To fit in, women had to abdicate their voice and fit into the mould of a silent spectator with nothing to contribute. Men, on the other hand, had to over-emphasize toxic masculinity or feared to be outcast by being called 'unmanly'.</p>	<p>Gendering heteronomous obedience.</p>	<p>'... they said "this new girl" What does she know about anything? And for a good six months after that I remember being a wallflower.' (Zara, Sales).</p>	<p>Feelings of inadequacy. 'I don't think women can thrive anywhere in Pakistan ... Pro-Care is just another workplace... dressing differently doesn't mean I am treated differently... I feel I belong but only till I am the image they have of a woman ... no matter what [women] do, we are not equal.' (Javeria, IT)</p> <p>Feelings of guilt. '[I was guilty] as a man ... just for showing over the top [masculine] traits got them [seniors] to like me ... while putting others down.' (Zaman, Sales)</p>
			<p>'... forcefully project myself as "rude" and not give credit a lot of times where it was due, because "you didn't want to be labelled as emasculated, praising girls all day ... to treat the other gender badly".' (Amir, Sales)</p> <p>'You know before you even enter a situation, that you are setting yourself up for this sort of manipulation. But then it also helps... I feel my membership in my team may be adversely affected.' (Salman, Marketing)</p>	<p>Feelings of isolation in personal lives. 'I couldn't say no, on my last two vacations I was doing office work, I couldn't relate to my family and it's getting lesser and lesser by day ... I feel stuck because I want to be a bigger part of their [family's] life, but that is still uncommon ... I want the life my father lived ... just providing.' (Abdullah, HR)</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

Navigating the politicization of belonging	Interplay of obedience and politicized belonging	Mechanisms conveying heteronomous obedience	Examples	Engendered ill-being: through feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation
3. Concealing personality traits that were not desired by the organization, including aspects of personality, values and emotions, while projecting preferred traits.	Regulating traits, which meant abdicating one's autonomy to external authorities, such as hiding religious views, developing social habits that were against their value systems, and being 'yes (wo)men'.	Concealing personality/values.	<p>'... working mostly with models, designing advertisement campaigns and more PR events in a week than there were days ... ProCare mostly was involved with the show-business industry, which I still struggle to get used to because of my religious practices.' (Bakhtawar, Sales)</p> <p>'... Sometimes people around me are saying things, and even if I don't agree with their opinions, I have had to fake interest and regulate my behaviour in how I react to those people.' (Zaid, Sales)</p> <p>'I had to apologize although I wasn't directly involved in the situation. When I resisted ... I felt like an outsider. My values have always guided me but here I have to cast them aside.' (Mohammad, Marketing)</p>	<p>Feelings of inadequacy. '[I was] not doing enough for myself while others were putting their futures and futures of their family first, they are justified to project themselves the way it benefits them [professionally and personally].' (Mohammad, Marketing)</p> <p>Feelings of guilt. 'This is my fate ... to know [I am the part of the problem] and still not do anything ... I should [change it for others], but I don't.' (Bitawal, HR)</p> <p>Feelings of isolation in personal lives. 'I feel like my family would not even recognize me [at work]. I behaved differently. I did what I wouldn't normally think of doing or behaving. My eating habits, socializing with childhood friends, interests, all were living two different lives. There is no way you could draw a parallel between them ... you wouldn't recognize me if you met me outside [of work].' (Omar, IT)</p>

three outcomes of ill-being. These themes are unpacked in more detail below.

Mimicking the 'modern'

The need to belong acted as a disciplining mechanism, whereby in order to belong, employees subjugated their originality and instead mimicked ways in which they projected themselves as 'modern'. One such mimicking entailed portraying 'a lifestyle of the upper [elite] class' (Samad Corporate Management):

[One has to] showcase a certain way of speaking and carrying oneself. It was not based on merit, rather based on judging whether an individual was of good "breeding", whatever that meant (Zaman, Finance).

This 'showcasing' meant that:

You dress differently. More western wear, your regular, modest shalwar kameez [tunic and trousers] is only preferred if it is a designer label ... preferably sleeveless (Asifa, Marketing).

Another prominent aspect was how participants had to navigate belonging as it was politicized through one's educational background and the bifurcated education system in Pakistan. Morad (Finance) narrates:

Because these people [elites] are exposed to English as a first language, [they] have social skills that are otherwise not the focus in government [public] universities. There are people on my team that know each other from some extracurricular event they went to in high school or spelling bees and international multi-school trips ... [in public schools], students are taught most subjects in Urdu and very little focus is on social development due to lack of government funding.

In the rare instances when someone from a public or second-tier private business school was hired, they had difficulty in making a place for themselves if they wanted to be accepted. Umair, from Sales, was one of these. Reflecting on his experience, he considered himself 'lucky', as this was becoming a rare occurrence at ProCare:

I am that guy they give examples of. But then again, even though I was hired because of my extensive experience in the consumer goods space, I've still had to change a lot of who I was.

Another form of mimicking was to converse in the English language, putting on American or British accents, as was done by Abdullah (HR) to give the impression that he spent summers abroad, something that was common amongst his colleagues. Similarly, Rida, a new entrant at ProCare, joined an expensive fitness boot camp that some of her colleagues attended in an elite neighbourhood. For her, it created a common ground for

conversations as well as building visibility outside of work. A change in lifestyle for employees at ProCare also included fine dining in posh localities of the city, memberships to country clubs where senior executives were members, and enrolling one's children into private schools. Bilawal (HR) revisits his welcome lunch at a café:

I didn't know what linguine was until we had it for lunch... I remember thinking out loud 'but these are noodles' and noticed my team passing looks at each other. That's when I knew I had to work on myself.

However, according to Abdullah, these forms of mimicking the modern were unsaid boundaries and mirrored what he had done during his previous job in a Seth company:

Such a bias is not obvious, making it key to maintain ProCare's reputation as an equal-opportunity employer, classic of Western companies. How is it different to what I used to do previously [in a Seth organization] ... borrowing its vices?

All these factors acted as boundaries that excluded certain people, while including others. For those left out, the only possibility of belonging was through the mimicry of modernity.

Gendering heteronomous obedience

Where ProCare was considered to be a 'modern workplace', without remnants of hierarchies and gender inequalities characteristic of Seth culture, it was ironic that the organization remained patriarchal regardless. Many women narrated instances where they faced pressure to silence their voices and conform to the role of passive observers, with little room to contribute actively. Maazia (Marketing) believed that gendered expectations highlighted the remnants of the Seth culture because:

The topmost management [consisting of men from older generations] ... are heavily influenced by patriarchy ... in their world, women don't have a brain or a tongue, so they shouldn't think or speak.

For Maha (HR), controlling her emotions when frustrated or angry was one such form of submission as she 'didn't want to miss opportunities for progression and being accepted', because 'if I wouldn't control such emotions, I would be excluded ... but in laymen terms, I think I'd be thought of as being incompetent, as were most women were in our society'. According to Ujala (Sales), 'you have to police your emotions to fit the mould of being timid ... submissive to orders'. Additionally, Zara (Sales) recalls gender being a defining factor in who gets to speak and disagree, along with gender bias: '... they said "this new girl ... what does she know

about anything? And for a good six months after that, I remember being a wallflower”.’

Finally, physical appearance was also a contributing factor to ensuring belonging at work. This was counter to the myth of MNCs such as ProCare being meritocratic (notes from interview). There was an unsaid requirement for women in the organization to be physically attractive:

I remember I felt awkward being the only one with a hijab (head cover) here. Everyone thought I was unconfident. I felt I was looked at differently ... Since then, I have tweaked my appearance and went with a relaxed head cover and sometimes even without it and it made all the difference. I was more visible. (Bakhtawar, Sales)

Conversely, men felt compelled to exaggerate traits associated with toxic masculinity to avoid being labelled as ‘unmanly’ and risk social exclusion. This also manifested in greater pressure on employees to conform to societal norms related to gender roles, leading to limited flexibility in expressing individuality or challenging gender stereotypes. These expectations were opposite, in the sense that they were expected to be overbearing in their dealings with women in their teams. Zaid (Sales) faced isolation due to his respectful treatment of the opposite gender, leading to ‘missed opportunities and peers not taking him seriously’.

Another aspect of these gendered expectations was men in senior positions exploiting men working underneath them, often resulting in the latter picking up the slack for the former. Men experienced a different politicization, in that they had to portray traditionally accepted roles as dominant, assertive and sometimes even bossy. Salman felt ‘pressurized into presenting a softer view’ by his line manager about some suppliers, although the opposite was required:

You know before you even enter a situation, that you are setting yourself up for this sort of manipulation. But then it also helps me smooth things over when I feel my membership in my team may be adversely affected.

For Asad, saying ‘no’ to overbearing males at work and not doing what was required of him to belong meant that all his efforts at work would have professional repercussions, where he would be ‘buried in entry-level work pushing him further back’ in his career. This intersectionality between Sethism and elitism thus often involved stricter adherence to traditional gender roles and expectations, rather than the relatively equitable treatment of all genders seen in organizations in the West.

Concealing personality/values

To navigate belonging at work, employees also concealed certain personality traits and falsely projected desired traits, which, according to Zaman, meant being a

‘hypocrite’. One such theme of concealing was for the introverts at ProCare. The marketing culture was strong, as Sameer emphasized, and the ability to be an extrovert and derive energy from external surroundings was what constituted success at ProCare. Not only did ProCare emphasize speaking up about one’s success, but, as Abdullah (HR), says:

[ProCare] makes sure all employees know that in this environment, to be ‘one of us’, you need to make your contributions prominent.

Navigating belonging in the workplace often involved conforming to external authorities, leading to behaviours such as concealing religious beliefs. With Pakistan being an Islamic country, and with all our participants being Muslims, Islamic values were a way of living and extended to the workplace. Within MNCs such as ProCare, religious values were considered antiquated and extremist. Javeria (IT) added, ‘[you have to] be a chameleon’ by giving up the Islamic influences dominant in Pakistan, because they are considered ‘backward and oppressive’. The culture in ProCare, especially in social circles at work, was un-Islamic. Bakhtawar (Sales) narrates her own struggle in this regard, ‘... we are working mostly with models and designing advertisement campaigns... mostly involved with the show-business industry which as you know isn’t Islamic ... which I still struggle to get used to because of my religious practice’. For Ujala (Sales), obedience meant adopting social habits contrary to personal values. She recalled her experience of starting social drinking and smoking to gain acceptance, not letting her colleagues see how reluctant she was:

The team I worked with from the very beginning were all senior and much more at ease because they were here for a while. When I joined, I initially felt out of place ... I’m from a conservative family so all this (women smoking) isn’t acceptable. But I started gradually. And it made the world of a difference. I felt a noticeable change in how much more I was now involved ... I was being heard more. It changed how they see me, and I’ve had a lot of projects from first when I started off.

For others, submission meant compromising at various levels in terms of how to behave and how to adapt:

It’s a general phenomenon here. It happens a lot. Honestly, I even did it so many times. Sometimes people around me are saying things, and even if I don’t agree with their opinions, I have had to fake interest and regulate my behaviour in how I react to those people. (Zaid, Sales)

Fahd’s experience of resisting did not go too well either:

There is a presentation culture, and it is much too concentrated in ProCare. I previously came from an engineering background, so my ways were different... I didn’t waste

time, didn't hyperbole, came straight to the point. For a while, I didn't get much exposure because they didn't like the way I did my presentations.

This interplay between navigating belonging and obedience also highlighted tensions between maintaining individual autonomy and conforming to fit into organizational expectations:

I had to apologise although I wasn't directly involved in the situation. When I resisted ... I felt like an outsider. My values have always guided me but here I have to cast them aside. (Mohammad, Marketing)

These incidents of saying no or not submitting to ProCare's requirements meant isolation while also engendering feelings of inadequacy when employees did not submit, because voicing opinions that went against the majority of the powerful players meant being frozen out.

The many faces of ill-being

Surrendering one's freedom and choice through the three forms of submission to authority in order to belong had three outcomes of ill-being at work: (i) inadequacy, (ii) guilt and (iii) isolation in personal lives. Recall that these outcomes of ill-being were a processual consequence of navigating the interplay between heteronomous obedience and navigating belonging at work. Hence, the three outcomes of ill-being are relevant to all three main themes emerging from our analysis, which we discussed in the preceding section. Below, we elaborate on how these feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation in personal life are brought forth through the three main themes discussed previously.

Feelings of inadequacy. Suffering from feelings of inadequacy was a common occurrence among employees, who were navigating obedience in order to belong at work. Feeling inadequate owing to a threatened sense of belonging caused suffering for Maazia (Marketing), who initially tried to resist:

Not trying to be posh kept me up at night, I was made to feel like I did wrong [by saying no to something I was expected to do] ... like maybe I wasn't seeing [the merit in] what others were doing.

Fahd (Finance) also questioned his convictions and believed his suffering was self-inflicted:

I probably wasn't as strong as the others [who copied elite behaviours] ... like I wasn't putting in the hard work ... and that was on me [and] not them.

For Mohammad (Marketing), feeling inadequate extended to his personal life as well:

[I was] not doing enough for myself while others were putting their futures and futures of their family first; they

are justified to project themselves the way it benefits them [professionally and personally]... Do we have a choice then?

This was similar to what Hassan (Sales) felt:

Belonging is a constant race, the insecurity of 'trying' is mental torture. [While] not belonging is also tough to face ... alienation comes with its own baggage, doesn't it? It is easier said than done.

Feelings of guilt. Experiencing guilt was another outcome of ill-being because trying to belong meant reinforcing the same post-colonial legacies that were the root cause of this ill-being in the first place. Ahmed (Marketing) believed this was generational and would continue as such:

Our colonial history, love-hate relationship with class difference created by those who ruled over us has created a sort of complex in the society. And that has been moved into the corporate world as well ... and we are the culprits as much as we are the victims ... we keep the wheel turning.

For Benazir (HR), who put her children in an expensive private school, this guilt was driven by her own experiences of being brilliant but always paying for her expensive education through scholarships for the underprivileged:

[It is] social standing, elite education and upbringing, it is knowing the right and the rich people. We [as a family] were doing fine. But I kept on thinking, 'was I a good parent if I didn't give my children access to better resources?' ... I didn't want them to suffer like me [in future]. I want them to be on the other side. The privileged side.

Zaman (Sales) felt guilty because he was privileged through his gender:

As a man ... just for showing [masculine] traits they [seniors] liked me more than a more talented female and gave me an international project.

Bilal (HR) sums it up perfectly when he reflects on why he continued to project himself as an extrovert. Even if it gave him 'anxiety before every presentation', he chose to live with this sense of guilt: 'this is my fate ... to know [I am the part of the problem] and still not do anything ... I should [change it for others], but I don't.'

Feelings of isolation in personal life. Cultural norms and socio-economic pressures specific to Pakistan mean prioritizing work over personal life, leading to potential tensions between professional and personal well-being. This rang true for Abdullah (HR), as he experienced ill-being through work intensification and dissatisfaction with his life:

There is no work-life balance at ProCare, similar to Nishat Group where I previously worked. Expectations overload and old management styles persist. I report to the Director

of Finance. He was previously the Director of the bank owned by the Nishat group. So he uses those Seth tactics.

Another aspect of feeling isolated in their personal lives was that it was very difficult to say no to higher management, which was authoritarian. This led to work intensification because saying no to conservative deadlines or work overload hindered career progression:

Only when you are overworked will your boss notice you, and only then will you be taken seriously. Especially for us women at ProCare. The downside of this is that me and my family are growing apart. The more I stay at work, the more I cannot switch off at home. I like the financial independence my job gives me, so even though I suffer because of it, I don't want to leave it. My family wouldn't understand. In Pakistan, everyone thinks a woman loves staying at home. But that isn't true for most of us. Even our bosses think that. That is why we have to overwork to prove that we belong at work. (Sara, Marketing)

Finally, the continuous tension between behaving differently from their original selves meant employees had to juggle acceptance at work, by forsaking acceptance in their personal lives. Omar (IT) mentioned:

I feel like my family would not even recognize me [at work]. I behave differently. I do what I wouldn't normally think of doing or behaving. There is no way they could draw a parallel between, as I like to say, 'the two "me"s'.

Discussion

Inspired by the work of Fromm (1941/2011, 1981/2010), in this qualitative study we set out to explore the process of ill-being production through the interplay between heteronomous obedience and the politicization of belonging in a post-colonial context. In particular, our study illustrates that outcomes of ill-being are shaped by cultural, historical and socio-economic factors that have nuances and priorities specific to our non-Western context. First, navigating the politicization of belonging entails submission of employees (i) vis-à-vis mimicking desired behaviours; (ii) when the organization moulds and prescribes obedience through gendered expectations within the patriarchal society of Pakistan; and (iii) when employees hide their personality and/or values. These three mechanisms, then, lead to outcomes of ill-being through feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation in personal lives. Hence, ill-being was the overarching frame that covered a range of negative experiences and emotions, where employees struggled with a hybrid discourse that combined the progressiveness of an MNC with the locally salient 'Seth' culture in the workplace. Two central theoretical contributions follow from our analysis.

First, our study shows how the interplay between the politicization of belonging and heteronomous obedience fills in the gaps in our substantive understanding of how post-colonialism affected the formation of ill-being in organizations in the Global South. While an extensive body of research has shown how, for example, class, gender and race are important markers of difference in configuring employees across the Global North (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017), the importance of understanding diverse colonial experiences of ill-being has not been sufficiently explored in existing Western theories of ill-being production. For example, in relation to other post-colonial countries such as India, Bangladesh and Mexico, which also experience a hybrid of traditional values and modern corporate practices, Pakistan's case is distinct owing to its unique socio-political and religious landscape. The entrenchment of the 'Seth culture' in Pakistan, combined with Islamic norms and post-colonial hierarchies, creates a deeper clash between local cultural values and the expectations of global MNCs. This, as our findings show, blurs the lines between personal and professional relationships more intensely than in other post-colonial contexts, resulting in a greater internal conflict for employees and contributing to feelings of inadequacy, guilt and isolation. By focusing on how MNCs reinforce obedience through the politicization of belonging, our study emphasizes that postcolonial hierarchies and inequalities limit individual agency more sharply, shaping not just professional relationships but also personal identity and social belonging at work. This distinction is exacerbated in the context of the Pakistani workplace, which has less robust systems of social welfare (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022). For this reason, employees were in a more precarious position both economically and socially (Zulfiqar, 2019), and were therefore also more prone to engage in heteronomous obedience.

Our findings of ill-being as a micro-political struggle allowed for a fine-grained understanding of politico-economic and social structures in contemporary workplaces, while building an intimate understanding of post-colonial legacies. The delineation of factors contributing to ill-being in the Pakistani workplace provides a critical lens through which to expand existing literature on workplace well-being, particularly in post-colonial contexts. These findings emphasize the deep-rooted cultural and gendered dynamics that shape experiences of belonging and marginalization, revealing that the pressures of conforming to both global corporate ideals and traditional authority structures create unique forms of emotional conflict and isolation. By examining the intersection of cultural norms, gender and socio-economic factors, this study highlights how local workplace practices perpetuate systemic inequality and ill-being, a dynamic less explored in mainstream organizational studies (Kumar *et al.*, 2024; Lindebaum,

2024; Manan *et al.*, 2023). The development of these insights into hybrid workplace cultures offers a critical contribution to the literature on workplace well-being, particularly in non-Western and post-colonial contexts. Our study suggested that external factors, such as socio-economic conditions and the cultural and historical aspects of where workplaces are situated, may be more important than previously thought. It was surprising to see that not even one respondent felt a sense of belonging or indicated that the change in their behaviour was positive. This can be attributed to the cultural desire to work for international subsidiaries and MNCs that provide legitimacy of social status and standing in society, entangled with employees feeling guilty that they were reinforcing the same post-colonial legacies they were subjected to. Therefore, our central contribution is to conceptualize ill-being as a micro-political struggle where the imperative to conform and belong outweighs individual flourishing. This perspective enriches our understanding of how cultural and historical contexts influence employee experiences and outcomes of ill-being. By synthesizing our findings with recent research, including work on the impact of culturally specific practices on employee well-being and the interplay of global and local influences in multinational firms, we highlight the need for further investigation into the nuances of ill-being in diverse settings.

Second, and relatedly, our findings challenge the Western assumption that individuals resist or challenge when their well-being is threatened. Our analysis shows that the struggle to belong positions employees to experience ill-being through facing various organizational and (neo)colonial pressures and they are thus othered in various ways (Halasz, 2018). In fact, individuals preferred ill-being through various outcomes rather than resisting or leaving employment. This was because the alternatives of 'Seth' culture and the stratified social system woven into the fabric of organizational settings that are similar in nature to Pakistan were less preferred alternatives. Thus, our findings show that our need for belonging at work can be achieved through obedience, while reinforcing the problem of politicizing this basic human need that arises from such obedience. Complementing earlier calls for the use of 'Eastern' as well as indigenous theories in our research (Filatotchev *et al.*, 2020; Hrenyk and Salmon, 2024), our non-Western view could potentially expand, challenge and redirect our current understanding of ill-being. The social, historical and cultural idiosyncrasies elucidated in our findings challenge the allocative view to ill-being production at work and incorporate the realization that the complexity of ill-being reinforces class structures and magnifies the marginalization of gendered roles, which are present in patriarchal pockets of Western workplaces as well (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021). By promoting exactly what the 'modern' (Western) organization stands

against, namely obedience and exploitation, workers endanger their position not just at work but also in a society that deems modernity and elitism the gold standard of progress and prestige.

The practical implications of our study align with the evolving discourse that conceptualizes ill-being as a persistent, rather than a temporary, aspect of organizational life (Fida *et al.*, 2022). By examining the production of ill-being within a post-colonial context, our research highlights the inadequacy of applying generalized, Western-centric interventions such as health and wellness programs, which often fail to address the recurrent and culturally rooted nature of ill-being (Maravelias, 2009). Instead, our findings advocate for tailored approaches that consider the enduring impact of post-colonial legacies, the intersection of Seth culture, and social stratification in shaping employees' experiences. Recognizing ill-being as a recurrent feature of organizational life underscores the necessity for MNCs operating in such contexts to unpack the management of ill-health practices that systematically organize and perpetuate states of ill-being ensuring unhealthy, yet obedient, employees remain productive through the desire to belong. This can be done by implementing culturally sensitive strategies that acknowledge these persistent influences. Indeed, one could argue that MNCs need to keep this in mind *en route* to constructing a true sense of belonging to mitigate ill-being at work. By fostering genuine belonging and addressing the local manifestations of obedience, companies can better mitigate the ongoing production of ill-being and contribute to a healthier, more inclusive workplace environment (Röllmann, Weiss and Zacher, 2021).

While we have followed established guidelines for executing template analysis, we acknowledge several limitations in our study. First, qualitative data does not permit generalization but rather is concerned with refining or building theory (Bryman and Cassell, 2006). Our study complies with this requirement, as we have shown how our data analysis helps advance our substantive understanding of how the context and concepts at play enable the production of ill-being. Finally, we recognize that the sample stems from a particular type of organization whose characteristics (i.e. a multinational Western cosmetics firm operating in Pakistan) may have specific effects on how ill-being emerges, as well as how it is sustained and contested.

Future research could explore the same phenomena as experienced through narratives of elites to gauge whether they felt belonging and, relatedly, ill-being. Rather than bracketing ill-being conceptualizations into a dichotomous Western versus non-Western view, future research could also tease out how similar contextual factors, such as inequalities, social hierarchies and elitism, foster ill-being across a continuum (Kumar *et al.*, 2024; Wickert *et al.*, 2024). This effort would help in pur-

suing future research that Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers (2003) propose to conceptually enrich and empirically examine ill-being at work in situationally determined ways. This continued inquiry will help progress the emerging debate on the wider socio-organizational and historical factors that produce ill-being at work.

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