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The Paradox of Organizational Behavior in Command Institutions: A Critical Study of Obedience, Integrity, and Loyalty in the Indonesian National Police

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Abstract

This study critically examines the paradox of obedience within the Indonesian National Police (Polri), a command-based institution where hierarchical discipline, loyalty, and ethical conduct are often in tension. Drawing on 25 in-depth interviews with police officers and community members, and supported by document analysis, the research explores how institutional structures and leadership cultures shape behaviors related to moral disengagement, organizational silence, and vertical loyalty. Using a qualitative case study approach under an interpretivist paradigm, thematic coding was conducted with NVivo software to identify five dominant patterns: (1) imperative hierarchical obedience, (2) loyalty to superiors over institutional values, (3) systemic erosion of personal integrity, (4) fear-driven organizational silence, and (5) bifurcated public perceptions of institutional legitimacy. The findings reveal that obedience is frequently decoupled from moral judgment, transforming into an instrument of structural control that suppresses dissent and rewards conformity. Moreover, loyalty—while fostering cohesion—can enable permissive cultures that rationalize unethical conduct when not grounded in institutional ethics. The study offers a conceptual model linking obedience, loyalty, and silence as a behavioral continuum, which, if left unmoderated by ethical leadership and institutional integrity, results in normalized moral disengagement. This paper contributes theoretically to the discourse on command institutions by reframing obedience as an ethical condition shaped by organizational design, not merely individual will. It also provides practical insights for reforming policing culture through leadership training, whistleblower protection, and integrity-based accountability frameworks.

Keywords: obedience, organizational silence, loyalty, moral disengagement, police ethics, institutional integrity, hierarchical institutions

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INTRODUCTION

In command-based organizations such as police institutions, obedience is often regarded as a behavioral cornerstone to ensure discipline, operational coherence, and efficient implementation of directives. Rooted in hierarchical authority, obedience facilitates top-down control and rapid decision execution. Yet, scholarly inquiries have increasingly revealed the paradoxical nature of obedience in such settings. While obedience contributes to coordination and consistency, it can also undermine ethical reasoning and compromise institutional integrity when practiced uncritically or in the absence of ethical safeguards (Erwandy et al., 2025; Ungemah, 2021).

Obedience in hierarchical organizations is not monolithic; rather, it constitutes a double-edged dynamic. Empirical research shows that individuals often comply with authority even when it contradicts personal or societal ethical standards (Salama et al., 2020). Rantakari (2023) demonstrates that this form of obedience, while stabilizing command flow, may lead to ethical vulnerabilities—particularly when ethical leadership and institutional checks are absent. Within rigid structures such as policing institutions, obedience becomes mechanistic and uncritical, enabling normalization of ethically questionable directives. Moreover, as Salama et al. (2020) found, such obedience is often reinforced by social, cultural, and organizational pressures, leading to ethical dissonance and moral disengagement.

Mitigating the ethical hazards of obedience necessitates the presence of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders shape behavioral norms by modeling integrity, encouraging ethical dialogue, and creating institutional environments where subordinates feel safe to question and reflect. Guo, Xue, He, and Yasmin (2023) argue that ethical leadership not only promotes policy adherence but also cultivates moral sensitivity, allowing obedience to operate within ethical boundaries. Similarly, Fan, Wang, and Wang (2023) emphasize that when subordinates perceive congruence between personal values and organizational norms, they are more likely to engage in reflective obedience rather than passive compliance. Nemr and Liu (2021) further reinforce that ethical leadership at senior levels is essential in mitigating uncritical obedience and fostering accountability.

Organizational culture also plays a moderating role in this equation. As Agustina, Elfita, Zhulqurnain, Arif, and Primasari (2024) explain, when ethical norms are internalized through leadership and culture, the risks of obedience-related ethical compromise decrease. Conversely, in cultures that discourage questioning, obedience can be weaponized, leading to what Hsieh, Hsu, Kao, and Wang (2020) call unethical pro-organizational behavior—wherein individuals commit unethical acts to protect the institution's reputation.

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Compounding these issues is the phenomenon of organizational silence, which is particularly pronounced in police institutions. Organizational silence refers to the collective withholding of critical feedback, observations, or dissent due to fear of retaliation or social sanction (Ahmadian & Ejrami, 2023). In law enforcement, this silence is institutionalized through norms such as the "blue wall of silence"—a cultural construct that discourages officers from reporting misconduct or criticizing peers (Sweeting et al., 2022). Donner and Maskály (2022) found that police recruits are often socialized into these norms early in their careers, leading to the internalization of silence as a professional necessity.

A lack of psychological safety is central to understanding this silence. As Ahmadian and Ejrami (2023) explain, when employees fear punishment for speaking out, they are more likely to remain silent, even in the face of clear ethical violations. Wu (2022) adds that silence varies by context—rural policing environments, for instance, may exacerbate fear-based silence due to stronger interpersonal networks and fewer oversight mechanisms. The consequence is a self-reinforcing cycle where silence protects unethical conduct, weakens transparency, and deteriorates institutional integrity.

Intertwined with silence and obedience is the construct of loyalty. Loyalty, often deemed virtuous in public institutions, fosters cohesion and commitment. However, Berry, Lewis, and Sowden (2021) caution that uncritical or excessive loyalty can enable moral disengagement. Einolf (2024) illustrates how, in cases of historical injustice, loyalty was used to justify harmful practices, often through rationalization and ethical detachment. When loyalty is demanded without corresponding ethical scrutiny, it may legitimize deviant actions under the guise of institutional allegiance.

The tension between loyalty and ethical behavior is further aggravated by weak leadership and politicized environments. Hsieh et al. (2020) demonstrate that in the absence of ethical guidance, loyalty becomes a mechanism for justifying unethical acts—especially when these acts align with perceived organizational interests. Wang, Witteloostuijn, and Heine (T. Wang et al., 2023) suggest that public servants may rationalize unethical behavior as being in service of a higher institutional mission, especially in settings where performance is measured more on loyalty than integrity.

These dynamics are especially acute in developing countries, where institutional integrity and public accountability mechanisms are often underdeveloped. In such settings, weak institutional design fosters environments conducive to impunity and corruption. Mbulawa and Chingoiro (2024) argue that institutional fragility contributes to the erosion of police accountability and public trust. Kwaw-Nimeson and Tian (2023) reinforce that institutional quality, especially regarding oversight and transparency, is directly correlated with law enforcement accountability. Knysh and Ponomarenko (2021) extend this argument

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by noting that poor governance in one sector (e.g., extractive industries) reflects broader institutional weaknesses—including in policing.

Indonesia exemplifies this complexity. The country's public institutions, including Polri, are embedded in hierarchical traditions that often resist dissent and reward loyalty over innovation or ethical reflection. Eryanto, Jones, and Lasthuizen (2022) highlight how political interference undermines ethical leadership credibility in Indonesia's public sector, including its police force. Research by Hattab, Wirawan, Salam, Daswati, and Niswaty (2022) shows that toxic leadership—marked by authoritarianism and suppression—correlates with increased turnover and counterproductive behaviors. At the same time, there is evidence that transformational leadership, when coupled with ethical norms, can mitigate these effects and stimulate institutional reform (Makatita et al., 2024; Yudiatmaja et al., 2023).

Despite a growing body of research on public sector ethics, there is limited empirical inquiry into how obedience, loyalty, and silence operate interactively within semi-militarized institutions such as Polri. Most existing literature isolates these variables or focuses on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how they manifest in Southeast Asian command institutions with distinct political and cultural dynamics. This study addresses that gap by integrating obedience, moral disengagement, and psychological safety into a unified framework for analyzing ethical behavior in the Indonesian National Police.

This study aims to: Examine how hierarchical obedience within Polri influences ethical reasoning and behavior. Explore the conditions under which institutional loyalty leads to moral disengagement. Analyze how organizational silence is produced and sustained in policing structures. Propose structural and leadership-based reforms to realign obedience with ethical accountability.

This study seeks to explore critical questions concerning ethical dynamics within the Indonesian National Police (Polri), particularly how hierarchical obedience influences ethical conduct among its members. It examines the circumstances under which loyalty transforms into a mechanism of moral disengagement, allowing individuals to justify or overlook unethical actions. Furthermore, the research investigates the organizational and cultural factors that reinforce silence in reporting misconduct, contributing to a climate of impunity. Finally, the study aims to assess how ethical leadership can serve as a counterbalance to the detrimental effects of blind obedience and institutional silence, offering pathways toward a more accountable and integrity-driven policing culture.

Theoretically, this research advances the literature by synthesizing obedience, loyalty, and silence within a command-institution framework grounded in the Indonesian context. Practically, the study offers policy-oriented insights for institutional reform,

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emphasizing the need for ethical leadership, protected reporting mechanisms, and a cultural shift toward transparency. By doing so, it contributes to the broader agenda of improving governance, public trust, and institutional accountability in developing countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Obedience in Hierarchical Institutions

Obedience has long been regarded as a fundamental mechanism through which hierarchical institutions ensure order, discipline, and operational coherence. Within command-driven environments, particularly those such as the military or police forces, obedience transcends mere compliance and becomes institutionalized as a behavioral and moral norm (Javaid et al., 2020; Kleden, 2025). The phenomenon is best understood as a multidimensional construct that operates at the intersection of structure, affect, and cognition. Studies show that in such organizations, obedience is often reinforced by an implicit "hidden curriculum" that promotes deference to authority, procedural fidelity, and suppression of dissent (Kozina, 2021). This pedagogical orientation—especially evident in military or paramilitary training academies—shapes not only task execution but also the moral frameworks of personnel.

The risk, however, lies in the emergence of "crimes of obedience," whereby individuals engage in unethical behavior due to institutional demands or authoritative directives (Javaid et al., 2020). While obedience may serve as a functional necessity for maintaining hierarchical coherence, its uncritical application can facilitate the erosion of ethical responsibility. The paradox becomes stark when authority is misused, and personnel, under the guise of institutional loyalty, perpetrate actions that conflict with societal moral standards. Rantakari (2023) offers a theoretical model suggesting that obedience is negotiated within an equilibrium of voluntary agency and institutional coercion. Here, obedience not only legitimizes authority but also sustains organizational hierarchies through recursive reinforcement.

Salama et al. (2020) further deepen this understanding by identifying the complex motivations behind obedience in unethical contexts. Their qualitative work emphasizes that such behavior is not merely reactive but often results from sustained emotional and institutional conditioning. The phenomenon is exacerbated when employees lack ethical role models or when institutional culture discourages moral scrutiny. Thus, while obedience is instrumental in securing organizational alignment, its dark underside—when divorced from ethical oversight—can lead to systemic deviance.

Kleden (2025) introduces a socio-affective model wherein obedience is tied to emotional alignment with institutional objectives. This model is particularly useful in

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explaining how loyalty, pride, and emotional identification with an organization can mask or suppress ethical judgment. In sum, obedience in hierarchical organizations operates as a double-edged sword, one that must be tempered by institutional safeguards, leadership accountability, and a culture of ethical awareness.

Ethical Leadership and Psychological Safety

The role of ethical leadership in shaping obedience and psychological safety is both foundational and transformative. Ethical leaders serve as anchors of normative behavior, fostering environments where subordinates are not only expected to comply with directives but are also encouraged to question them through ethical reflection. Guo et al. (2023) illustrate that ethical leadership is positively associated with employee ethical work behavior, particularly in institutions where formalized structures heighten the risk of blind obedience. Such leadership moderates the obedience–deviance relationship by promoting transparency, fairness, and inclusive communication.

Fan et al. (2023) add that ethical congruence between leaders and subordinates reinforces leadership identification, which in turn fosters moral engagement and discourages passive conformity. Nemr and Liu (2021) demonstrate that ethical leadership at senior levels promotes in-role performance and mitigates the diffusion of unethical practices. These findings underscore that leadership is a crucial moderator in shaping how obedience is practiced and perceived in command-based institutions.

Psychological safety—a shared belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of retribution—also plays a vital role in mitigating organizational silence and enhancing ethical behavior. Megawati et al., (2022) emphasize that leadership styles that embody compassion and openness help dismantle barriers to psychological safety. Moon and Kang (2016) further show that dialogic communication fosters psychological empowerment, which in turn reduces employee silence. The presence of psychological safety ensures that obedience is exercised within an ethically conscious framework, thus balancing operational discipline with moral agency.

Organizational Silence and Its Ethical Implications

Organizational silence poses a serious threat to institutional accountability, particularly in environments with entrenched power hierarchies. Defined as the intentional withholding of important information or feedback, silence often results from fears of reprisal, loss of status, or institutional sanction. Sweeting et al. (2022) document how the "blue wall of silence" in policing environments discourages officers from reporting

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misconduct, even in cases of sexual abuse. Such silence becomes institutionalized, perpetuating unethical behavior through normative reinforcement and group loyalty.

Ahmadian and Ejrami (2023) suggest that trust and psychological commitment can help reduce silence, but only when accompanied by institutional mechanisms that protect whistleblowers. Donner and Maskály (2022) found that recruits in police academies begin to internalize norms of silence early in their careers, indicating that this behavior is not incidental but systematically cultivated. Wu (2022) adds a contextual dimension, noting that rural environments often exacerbate silence due to tight-knit social structures and limited oversight.

Beyond policing, silence can impede innovation and learning across public sector organizations. Moon & Kang, et al. (2024) demonstrate that interventions aimed at improving psychological safety reduce silence and enhance team effectiveness in healthcare settings. Liao et al. (2022) further show that positive gossip—used strategically—can reinforce a culture of transparency and trust, enabling the early identification of risks and issues.

Loyalty and Moral Disengagement in Public Institutions

Loyalty is often valorized as a virtue in public service, but research increasingly highlights its ambivalence. While loyalty fosters commitment and group cohesion, it can also catalyze moral disengagement when taken to an extreme. Berry et al. (2021) conceptualize loyalty as a "double-edged sword," noting that uncritical allegiance can lead to ethical compromises. Employees may prioritize institutional interests over public accountability, rationalizing deviant behavior as necessary for organizational preservation.

Einolf (2024) provides historical evidence from apartheid-era South Africa to illustrate how loyalty was weaponized to justify torture and abuse. Hsieh et al. (2020) theorize that moral disengagement arises when employees perceive that their unethical actions serve a higher organizational mission. In this way, loyalty—especially when enforced through authoritarian leadership—becomes a mechanism of ethical disconnection.

Wang et al. (2023) explore the moral theory of public service motivation, demonstrating that highly motivated employees may be particularly susceptible to moral disengagement when institutional cultures emphasize loyalty without reflection. Ripoll and Schott (2020) similarly find that public employees often rationalize rule-bending behavior to resolve dissonance between personal ethics and organizational loyalty. These findings emphasize the need for ethical leadership and accountability frameworks that channel loyalty constructively and mitigate its potential harms.

Institutional Integrity and Command-Based Organizational Behavior in Indonesia

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The Indonesian public sector, including institutions like Polri, provides a salient case study for understanding the convergence of hierarchical obedience, institutional integrity, and ethical governance. Harun et al. (2020) underscore the importance of adopting international public sector accounting standards (IPSAS) as a mechanism for reinforcing transparency and accountability. Their findings indicate that without strong integrity systems, command-based organizational structures in Indonesia are prone to abuse, opacity, and inefficiency.

Said et al. (2022) reinforce this argument by demonstrating how integrity systems based on rigorous standards and independent oversight can mitigate the risks inherent in top-down command models. In contexts where hierarchical authority is dominant, institutional integrity becomes not only a corrective mechanism but also a strategic enabler of ethical behavior.

Håkansson (2022) introduces the concept of multiple institutional logics, which is particularly relevant for Indonesia. Here, the simultaneous existence of traditional command-based logics and emerging demands for accountability creates a tension that institutions must navigate. Eryanto et al. (2022) reveal that political interference remains a persistent challenge, undermining ethical leadership and reinforcing loyalty-driven obedience over ethical reflection.

Hattab et al. (2022) examine the implications of toxic leadership within Indonesian public institutions, linking it to increased turnover and counterproductive work behavior. Conversely, studies by Makatita et al. (2024) and Yudiatmaja et al. (2023) highlight how transformational and servant leadership models, when embedded in a culture of trust, can stimulate innovation and restore ethical integrity.

This literature review reveals a nuanced and interconnected understanding of obedience, silence, loyalty, leadership, and institutional integrity within hierarchical public institutions—especially in Indonesia. It illustrates that while obedience and loyalty are critical for organizational cohesion, they must be tempered by ethical leadership, psychological safety, and institutional integrity. Unchecked, these mechanisms may foster silence and moral disengagement, undermining accountability and public trust. The review also underscores the need for structural reforms and cultural transformation, particularly within command-based organizations, to align operational discipline with ethical imperatives.

Future research should focus on empirically testing these interactions within Indonesia's law enforcement institutions, incorporating longitudinal designs and participatory models that account for organizational complexity. Only through such

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multidimensional inquiry can public institutions balance the imperatives of command with the demands of integrity.

To synthesize the current body of literature, Table 1 provides a structured overview of key empirical and theoretical contributions that inform this study. The selected works span diverse methodologies—including qualitative inquiries, theoretical frameworks, survey-based analyses, and case studies—thus offering a multidimensional perspective on obedience, ethical leadership, organizational silence, loyalty, and institutional integrity. Collectively, these studies underscore the centrality of obedience within hierarchical systems, while highlighting its ethical ambiguities when not counterbalanced by strong leadership or accountability structures. Furthermore, the literature converges on the insight that organizational silence and moral disengagement are not merely individual failings, but systemic consequences of cultures that prioritize loyalty and control over ethical deliberation and psychological safety.

Notably, while significant progress has been made in delineating the antecedents and consequences of obedience and silence in Western and comparative contexts, empirical research remains scarce in the context of Indonesian command-based institutions, particularly within law enforcement agencies such as the National Police. Moreover, few studies have holistically examined the interrelations between obedience, loyalty, organizational silence, and institutional integrity within a single analytical framework. This gap signals a need for contextually grounded investigations that interrogate how these constructs co-exist, interact, and manifest in environments where hierarchical discipline is paramount yet ethical accountability is often contested.

Accordingly, the present study builds upon this literature by integrating these theoretical strands into a conceptual framework tailored to Indonesia's institutional realities. It seeks to uncover how ethical leadership and organizational integrity can serve as moderating forces in mitigating the adverse effects of rigid obedience and uncritical loyalty, thereby contributing both to the theoretical refinement of organizational behavior in command institutions and to the practical discourse on institutional reform.

Tabel 1. Sintesis Literatur

Author(s)	Year	Topic	Method	Key Findings	Relevance to This Study
Javaid et al.	2020	Crimes of obedience in	Qualita-tive	Obedience can lead to unethical outcomes under	Highlights ethical risks of

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		authority systems		authoritative pressure	command-based obedience
Rantakari	2023	Equilibrium models of obedience	Theoretical	Obedience is negotiated between autonomy and hierarchical control	Supports view of obedience as structurally and individually constructed
Salama et al.	2020	Unethical obedience in organizations	Qualitative	Obedience arises from emotional and systemic pressures	Explains psychological drivers behind unethical obedience
Guo et al.	2023	Ethical leadership and ethical behavior	Quantitative	Ethical leadership enhances moral sensitivity and reduces deviance	Justifies leadership as a moderating variable
Fan et al.	2023	Leadership congruence and ethical identity	Survey	Ethical alignment fosters moral awareness and positive followership	Connects leadership identity with ethical compliance
Sweeting et al.	2022	Police silence culture	Mixed Methods	"Blue wall of silence" prevents accountability in law enforcement	Highlights silence as a barrier in hierarchical institutions
Wu	2022	Silence in rural police	Survey	Rural officers face stronger fear of speaking out	Shows how context affects organizational silence
Berry et al.	2021	Loyalty and ethical compromise	Conceptual	Loyalty may lead to moral disengagement	Explains risks of uncritical loyalty in public institutions
Einolf	2024	Loyalty under	Historical-Case	Loyalty justified unethical	Demonstrates institutional

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		authoritarian regimes		practices in apartheid-era South Africa	rationalization of unethical behavior
Harun et al.	2020	IPSAS and institutional reform in Indonesia	Empirical-Policy	Strong integrity systems reduce risks in command-based systems	Provides framework for Indonesian public sector context
Hattab et al.	2022	Toxic leadership in Indonesian public orgs	Quantitative	Toxic leadership increases unethical and counterproductive behaviors	Supports leadership reform in Indonesia's public sector
Yudiatmaja et al.	2023	Leadership and innovation in Indonesia	Quantitative	Trust-based leadership fosters innovation among millennial public employees	Adds generational perspective to ethical and effective leadership

Conceptual Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in a multi-dimensional understanding of organizational behavior in command institutions, particularly focusing on how obedience, loyalty, and organizational silence interact within hierarchical structures that may lack strong ethical safeguards. Drawing from the reviewed literature, the conceptual framework integrates both structural and psychological dimensions of employee behavior. Specifically, the model posits that **obedience** serves as the initial behavioral orientation within hierarchies, which may evolve into **loyalty** or, if unbalanced, contribute to **organizational silence**. These dynamics are hypothesized to facilitate **moral disengagement**, particularly when ethical leadership is absent or institutional integrity is weak.

In this regard, the framework incorporates **ethical leadership** and **institutional integrity** as critical moderating variables that can potentially reshape the ethical consequences of hierarchical control. Ethical leadership provides normative guidance and models of moral conduct, while institutional integrity ensures that organizational norms, policies, and enforcement mechanisms reinforce accountability. Taken together, these elements form the foundation for the conceptual framework of the study, which is visually depicted below.

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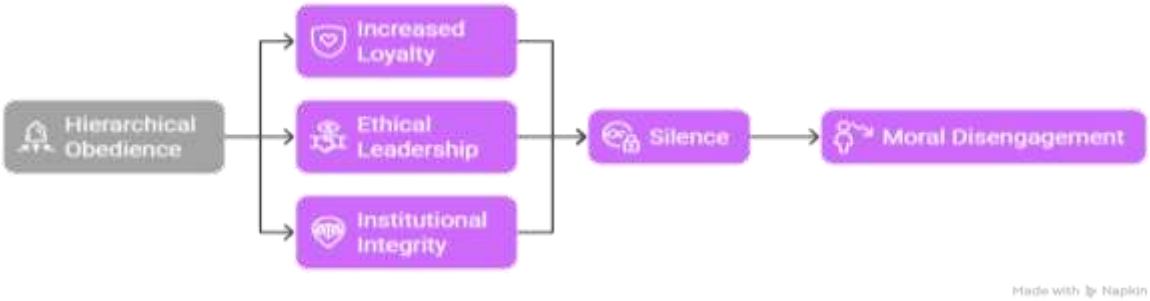


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework:

This model illustrates the ethical trajectory of hierarchical obedience in command institutions, emphasizing how increased loyalty and silence may culminate in moral disengagement. Ethical leadership and institutional integrity are positioned as critical moderating forces that can weaken the negative impacts of obedience-driven cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a case study approach, focusing on the organizational behavior of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) as a command-based institution. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena such as obedience, loyalty, organizational silence, and moral disengagement, particularly within hierarchical and politically sensitive environments (Erwandy et al., 2025; Harun et al., 2020). The case study design allows for an in-depth investigation of processes, meanings, and power dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

This research is interpretivist in its philosophical orientation, assuming that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals embedded in institutional settings. The aim is to generate contextualized insights rather than generalizable laws, and to build theory from empirical engagement rather than impose a priori models.

Research Setting and Context

The research is situated in Indonesia, a country whose public institutions are strongly influenced by hierarchical traditions, formal authority, and collectivist cultural norms. The Indonesian National Police (Polri) represents a paradigmatic case of a command institution

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where obedience is institutionally embedded, loyalty is structurally enforced, and ethical dilemmas are often managed internally. The selection of Polri as the research site is theoretically driven and strategically purposive—given its centrality in public administration, its command culture, and the ongoing discourse surrounding police ethics and institutional reform in the country (Eryanto et al., 2022; Makatita et al., 2024)

Participants and Sampling

The study involved **25 participants** selected through purposive and snowball sampling. These participants included active and retired officers of the Indonesian National Police (Polri), as well as community members who had recent experiences interacting with the institution. The final number was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, where no new themes emerged during the final rounds of data collection. The diversity of ranks and roles (e.g., Briptu, AKP, Iptu, retired personnel, and community leaders) ensured a rich and varied perspective on the institutional culture and behavioral dynamics under study.

The diversity of ranks and roles (e.g., Briptu, AKP, Iptu, retired personnel, and community leaders) ensured a rich and varied perspective on the institutional culture and behavioral dynamics under study. This variation was crucial for capturing the interplay between formal hierarchy and public perception, a core analytical axis of the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either in person or through secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the availability and location of the participant. The interview protocol was designed to explore four major domains:

1. Perceptions of obedience and command structure,
2. Manifestations and drivers of loyalty,
3. Experiences of organizational silence or dissent,
4. Attitudes toward ethical leadership and institutional integrity.

All interviews were recorded—with informed consent—and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes and memos were also maintained to capture contextual information, non-verbal cues, and emerging patterns. In addition to interviews, the study employed document analysis of internal regulations, ethical codes, training materials, and public reports on police conduct. These documents provided important triangulation data to verify or nuance interview findings.

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Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis followed a **reflexive thematic analysis approach** (RTA), which is suitable for identifying patterned meaning across qualitative datasets while allowing for interpretive depth and researcher reflexivity. The analysis proceeded through six phases:

1. Familiarization with data through immersive reading of transcripts,
2. Generating initial codes based on semantic and latent content,
3. Searching for themes that capture conceptual relationships (e.g., loyalty-silence nexus),
4. Reviewing themes across cases to ensure coherence and distinction,
5. Defining and naming themes aligned with theoretical constructs,
6. Writing analytical narratives that integrate data extracts with conceptual discussion.

Coding was both deductive (based on literature-derived constructs) and inductive (emerging from field data). NVivo software was used to manage coding, ensure transparency, and facilitate cross-case analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the following strategies were employed:

- **Credibility**: Prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation between interviews and documents were conducted. Member checking was also applied by sending synthesized findings back to a subset of participants for verification.
- **Transferability**: Thick description of the institutional context and participant narratives enhances the transferability of findings to similar hierarchical institutions within or beyond Indonesia.
- **Dependability**: An audit trail was maintained, including raw data, codebooks, analytical memos, and reflective journals. This allows for replication or review by external auditors if needed.
- **Confirmability**: Reflexive journaling was conducted to monitor potential biases, particularly those related to the researcher's positionality and assumptions about institutional authority.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received informed consent forms that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality protections. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details were redacted from transcripts and quotations to ensure anonymity.

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Given the sensitivity of the topics—particularly around dissent, misconduct, and internal silence—interviews were conducted with utmost care, and participants were assured that no information would be shared with their institution or used for evaluative purposes. Digital data were stored in encrypted formats and access was restricted to the research team only.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, as a qualitative study, its findings are not statistically generalizable but rather intended to offer in-depth, contextual insights. Second, the sensitivity of the topic may have introduced self-censorship among participants, despite confidentiality assurances. Finally, the perspectives of higher-ranking officers may be underrepresented due to access constraints.

Nonetheless, the study offers a rare empirical window into the ethical dynamics of obedience and silence in Indonesian command institutions and lays the groundwork for future research involving mixed-method or comparative designs.

RESEARCH AND RESULTS

This section presents and analyzes the primary findings derived from 25 in-depth interviews and supporting document analysis. The empirical data reveal five core themes that characterize the behavioral and ethical dynamics within the Indonesian National Police (Polri), a command-based organization where loyalty, hierarchy, and obedience intersect with systemic pressures. These themes are discussed in relation to the theoretical concepts introduced in the literature review, enabling a deeper understanding of how organizational culture, leadership, and institutional frameworks shape the conduct of personnel in hierarchical institutions.

Hierarchical Obedience and the Erosion of Moral Autonomy

One of the most dominant themes emerging from the interviews is the absolute and non-negotiable nature of obedience within the Polri's hierarchical structure. Respondents consistently conveyed that commands from superiors are treated as imperatives, irrespective of their ethical implications. As one mid-level officer stated, *"When orders come from above, there is no room for refusal—even when we know it is wrong deep down"* (AKP, 17 years of service). This finding illustrates the rigid command culture within Polri, where obedience is normalized not merely as organizational discipline but as a moral virtue in itself.

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This dynamic aligns with prior theoretical discussions which argue that in command institutions, hierarchical obedience is often internalized as an expression of professional identity, rather than a subject of ethical reflection (Javaid et al., 2020; Kozina, 2021). Rantakari (2023) posits that within such structures, obedience operates as a negotiated equilibrium between individual agency and the legitimacy of authority. However, in the absence of ethical leadership or institutional safeguards, this balance collapses, leading to what Salama et al. (2020) call "adaptive obedience"—compliance that overrides moral reasoning for the sake of systemic alignment.

Participants' testimonies suggest that within Polri, such obedience is rarely accompanied by moral deliberation, thereby eroding individual autonomy. This mirrors concerns raised in affective-cognitive models of obedience, where sustained emotional alignment with institutional power suppresses moral dissonance (Kleden, 2025). Consequently, obedience becomes an instrument of structural control rather than a conduit for ethical responsibility.

Vertical Loyalty and the Reproduction of Permissive Culture

The second major theme highlights the predominance of personal loyalty to immediate superiors over institutional values or public accountability. Several participants expressed greater concern about disappointing their commanders than violating professional ethics. As one junior officer candidly noted, *"We are more afraid of letting down our commander than breaking our professional oath"* (Briptu, 4 years of service).

This finding corroborates the conceptualization of loyalty as a double-edged sword (Berry et al., 2021; Einolf, 2024). While loyalty can foster trust and cohesion, uncritical or blind loyalty becomes a vehicle for moral disengagement (Hsieh et al., 2020). When hierarchical loyalty takes precedence over institutional accountability, employees are more likely to rationalize unethical behaviors in service of their immediate superiors.

The permissive culture described by participants reflects an environment where loyalty becomes a shield against scrutiny. Ethical violations are tolerated or overlooked, particularly when they are perceived to uphold group interests or protect authority figures. This resonates with findings by Fan et al. (023), who demonstrate that loyalty, when uncoupled from ethical leadership, can reinforce deviant norms and silence moral dissent.

Furthermore, this vertical loyalty structure reinforces a hierarchy-dependent culture that suppresses horizontal accountability and ethical reflexivity. The risk is the institutionalization of what Ripoll and Schott (2020) term "ethical loyalty traps," wherein employees act unethically to maintain favor with superiors, ultimately eroding the integrity of the entire organization.

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Systemic Pressures and the Decline of Individual Integrity

Several participants reported a progressive loss of idealism and personal integrity over the course of their careers. While many began with strong ethical commitments, systemic pressures—including fear of isolation, lack of support for whistleblowers, and absence of recognition for ethical conduct—gradually forced them to conform to a permissive environment. One retired officer remarked, *"I started off idealistic, but over time I just went with the flow because the system doesn't support honest people"* (Retired, 2021).

This theme reveals how institutional cultures shape ethical behavior not through explicit policies, but through subtle pressures and behavioral modeling. As Guo et al. (2023) argue, ethical leadership is essential in maintaining ethical sensitivity among employees, especially in organizations where rules alone are insufficient to guide behavior.

In the absence of such leadership, personnel are compelled to adapt to the dominant norms, even if those norms deviate from ethical expectations. This form of ethical erosion is consistent with the process of moral disengagement, whereby individuals justify unethical conduct as being in service to the organization (Fan et al., 2023; Hsieh et al., 2020).

The findings also reflect the "institutional dissonance" described by Knysh and Ponomarenko (2021), where the values proclaimed by an organization conflict with the behaviors it rewards. In such environments, ethical conduct is not only unrewarded but may be penalized, further accelerating moral compromise.

Organizational Silence and Fear-Based Compliance

One of the most striking and troubling findings is the widespread presence of organizational silence within Polri. Participants noted that speaking out against misconduct often results in social ostracism, punitive reassignment, or career stagnation. As an inspector with over a decade of service revealed, *"If you report something, you could be transferred or become an outcast in your own office"* (Iptu, 12 years of service).

This climate of fear aligns closely with the concept of psychological unsafety, wherein individuals refrain from voicing concerns due to perceived interpersonal and institutional risks (Ahmadian & Ejrami, 2023; Kang & Moon, 2016). The literature shows that in command-based institutions, especially those with opaque accountability systems, silence becomes a rational coping mechanism rather than an ethical failure (Donner & Maskály, 2022; Sweeting et al., 2022).

Moreover, silence within such contexts is reinforced not only by fear but also by the absence of effective reporting mechanisms and protection for whistleblowers. Krause and Rousset (2023) emphasize that compassionate leadership and open dialogue are crucial for

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breaking this cycle, yet evidence from this study suggests that such practices are largely absent in the current structure of Polri.

The impact of silence extends beyond individual cases. It systematically weakens institutional integrity by allowing misconduct to persist unchecked and normalizing deviance. As Liao et al. (2022) suggest, when silence becomes a norm, it disables the organization's self-corrective capacities and entrenches ethical decline.

Public and International Perceptions of the Police: Between Reform and Residual Distrust

Despite efforts toward modernization and digitalization of services, the Indonesian public maintains a bifurcated perception of the police. On the one hand, many respondents from the community acknowledged improvements in service responsiveness and professionalism. For instance, a community leader from Banjarbaru noted, *"The officers are polite and responsive, but there is still the impression of favoritism if you're not an insider"* (RT Chairman, South Kalimantan). This duality reflects both tangible institutional progress and the persistent shadow of skepticism, particularly regarding equal access to justice and impartiality.

Such public ambivalence mirrors broader findings from surveys by Kompas and Indikator Politik, which show that while satisfaction with field-level police conduct has risen, trust in the institutional integrity of Polri remains uneven. These results are consistent with the observations of Mbulawa and Chingoiro (2024), who argue that public confidence in law enforcement is significantly shaped not only by individual officer behavior but by perceptions of institutional accountability and transparency.

At the international level, reports from organizations such as Transparency International (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2022) have echoed similar concerns. These reports cite systemic issues in the Indonesian police, including weak mechanisms for addressing human rights violations, insufficient protection for whistleblowers, and political interference in enforcement decisions. Kwaw-Nimeson and Tian (Kwaw-Nimeson & Tian, 2023) argue that such weaknesses in institutional integrity undermine not only public trust but also international legitimacy and investment climate, particularly in contexts where law enforcement is a primary interface between the state and society.

The dissonance between the image of reform and the persistence of impunity raises critical questions about the depth and authenticity of institutional transformation. Håkansson (2022) refers to this as the "coexistence of competing logics," where formal changes coexist with deeply embedded informal practices that resist change. In the case of Polri, this means that while public-facing improvements are visible, internal organizational

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culture and accountability structures remain largely intact—shaped by obedience, silence, and uncritical loyalty.

To consolidate the empirical findings and enhance analytical transparency, the themes emerging from interview data were systematically coded using a thematic analysis framework. This process involved identifying recurrent patterns, constructing axial codes that reflect the deeper conceptual structure, and aligning these with relevant theoretical constructs. Table 2 provides a synthesized overview of the five dominant themes, their representative quotes, associated coding elements, and theoretical links. This summary serves as a transitional scaffold between the thematic findings and the integrative conceptual analysis presented in the following section.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Coding and Theoretical Integration

Theme	Representative Quote	Initial Code	Axial Code (Sub-theme)	Theoretical Link
Hierarchical Obedience	"When orders come from above, there is no room for refusal—even when we know it is wrong." (AKP, 17 yrs)	No room to refuse orders	Suppression of moral agency	Adaptive obedience (Salama et al., 2020); Moral autonomy erosion (Kleden, 2025)
Vertical Loyalty	"We are more afraid of letting down our commander than breaking our professional oath." (Briptu, 4 yrs)	Fear of disappointing superiors	Loyalty vs. ethical responsibility	Loyalty trap (Ripoll & Schott, 2020); Blind loyalty (Hsieh et al., 2020)
Decline of Integrity	"The system doesn't support honest people." (Retired, 2021)	System penalizes idealism	Ethical fatigue & conformity	Institutional dissonance (Knysh & Ponomarenko, 2021); Moral disengagement (Wang et al., 2023)

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Organizational Silence	"If you report something, you could be transferred or become an outcast." (Iptu, 12 yrs)	Fear of retaliation	Silence as survival	Psychological unsafety (Moon & Kang, 2024); Whistleblower deterrence (Krause & Rousset, 2023)
Public Perception	"The officers are polite and responsive, but there is still favoritism." (Community leader, Banjarbaru)	Split perception of police	Trust vs. skepticism	Competing logics (Håkansson, 2022); Institutional trust (Mbulawa & Chingoiro, 2024)

Integrated Analysis: Reconstructing the Organizational Behavior of Polri

The empirical findings across the five thematic domains—hierarchical obedience, vertical loyalty, systemic erosion of integrity, organizational silence, and public/international perception—reveal a consistent pattern: the behavior of individual police personnel is profoundly shaped by the structural and cultural configurations of the institution. More specifically, these behaviors are not isolated personal failings but rather logical adaptations to a system that prioritizes control, compliance, and cohesion over reflection, dissent, and accountability.

The findings affirm the theoretical model advanced in this study, whereby hierarchical obedience initiates a behavioral trajectory that, when unmediated by ethical leadership or institutional integrity, evolves into a loyalty dynamic that silences ethical concerns and enables moral disengagement. As illustrated in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1), the unchecked progression from obedience to disengagement is not inevitable but conditional—one that can be interrupted by the presence of strong ethical leadership and robust institutional safeguards.

For example, participants who reported working under commanders perceived as ethical and open tended to express less disillusionment and a greater willingness to voice concerns, even when doing so entailed personal risk. This finding echoes the conclusions of Fan et al. (2023) and Guo et al. (2023), who assert that ethical congruence and inclusive leadership are crucial in cultivating moral courage and psychological safety in high-power-distance environments.

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The recurrence of organizational silence as a dominant theme also substantiates the propositions of Ahmadian and Ejrami (2023) and Sweeting et al. (2022), who argue that silence in law enforcement is institutionally sustained and functionally rational. In Polri, this silence is reinforced by an absence of credible reporting systems and the social stigmatization of whistleblowing. These conditions produce a form of ethical paralysis, in which personnel normalize deviance as a survival strategy.

Furthermore, the findings on loyalty and moral disengagement validate the theoretical assertions of Berry et al. (2021), Einolf (2024), and Hsieh et al. (2020), who collectively demonstrate that in hierarchical institutions, loyalty may paradoxically facilitate ethical decline when it is detached from institutional values and public accountability. This is particularly evident in how participants described loyalty to immediate superiors as more consequential than loyalty to institutional mission or citizen service.

From a systems perspective, this research contributes to the conceptualization of "pathological obedience" in state institutions—obedience that has been socially legitimized and professionally valorized despite its ethical consequences. It supports the claim by Rantakari (2023) that in the absence of institutional integrity and external oversight, command-based systems are inherently predisposed to moral erosion.

Implications for Organizational Reform and Future Research

The empirical evidence outlined in this study suggests that improving ethical behavior within Polri—and by extension, similar command-based institutions—cannot be achieved solely through individual moral appeals or technical reforms. It necessitates a transformation in leadership culture, institutional values, and structural protections for ethical action.

First, **ethical leadership development** must be prioritized, particularly among mid- and senior-level commanders. Leadership training should focus not only on operational command but also on ethical reasoning, moral reflexivity, and psychological safety.

Second, **institutional integrity mechanisms**—such as independent oversight bodies, protected whistleblowing channels, and performance evaluations based on ethical conduct—should be institutionalized. These systems are necessary to break the cycle of silence and to realign loyalty with public service values.

Third, **organizational culture change** must be actively pursued through participatory policy-making, routine ethical discourse, and recognition of dissent as a form of organizational commitment rather than deviance.

Finally, future research should build upon these findings through longitudinal and comparative studies, especially across varying levels of command and geographic regions.

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Incorporating perspectives from civilians, civil society, and external oversight institutions would also enrich the analytical scope.

Findings and Discussion

The behavioral dynamics uncovered in this study demonstrate that within hierarchical institutions such as Polri, ethical and organizational outcomes are deeply influenced by how obedience, loyalty, and silence are shaped by leadership and institutional design. The findings reveal a structural ecology of ethical behavior—where moral disengagement is not an aberration but a system-enabled outcome. By situating individual behaviors within broader institutional logics and governance structures, this study contributes to a more holistic and critical understanding of organizational behavior in command institutions.

The implication is clear: for command-based institutions to evolve into ethical, accountable, and trusted public bodies, they must reconfigure the internal mechanisms that reward obedience and loyalty at the expense of integrity and voice. Leadership, culture, and structural safeguards are not auxiliary to reform—they are its foundation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of obedience within command institutions by framing it not only as a behavioral outcome, but as a systemically constructed phenomenon influenced by institutional logics. It advances the discourse on moral disengagement by showing how silence and loyalty, when shaped by hierarchical dynamics, become ethically consequential. This integrated model may inform future research on state institutions in the Global South.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the paradoxical dynamics of obedience, loyalty, and organizational silence within the Indonesian National Police (Polri), a prototypical command-based institution. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 25 participants and extensive document analysis, the research uncovered five interrelated themes that shape the ethical behavior of personnel: the imperative nature of hierarchical obedience, vertical loyalty to superiors, systemic erosion of integrity, the normalization of organizational silence, and the tension between public perception and internal reform.

The findings affirm that obedience in command institutions, while essential for order and coordination, can foster environments of ethical ambiguity when not accompanied by robust institutional safeguards and ethical leadership. Loyalty, a traditionally celebrated value in public service, was shown to become ethically corrosive when directed exclusively toward superiors rather than institutional principles or public accountability. This dynamic,

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compounded by systemic silence and fear-based compliance, illustrates a behavioral trajectory that can lead to widespread moral disengagement.

By integrating theoretical insights from literature on moral disengagement, organizational silence, public sector ethics, and institutional integrity, this research contributes a critical framework for understanding how command structures interact with psychological and cultural variables to shape ethical behavior. The proposed conceptual model demonstrates that hierarchical obedience—unless moderated by ethical leadership and institutional integrity—can evolve into loyalty-based silence and ethical disengagement.

The study also underscores the structural, rather than individual, nature of ethical dilemmas in command-based institutions. Personnel do not merely comply passively; rather, they adapt to systemic norms and implicit rules that govern silence, conformity, and loyalty. Thus, efforts to reform such institutions must go beyond technical interventions and address the cultural and leadership dimensions that sustain unethical organizational behavior.

Several practical recommendations emerge from the study. Leadership development programs must emphasize ethical reasoning, inclusive communication, and psychological safety. Institutional mechanisms should be established to protect whistleblowers, foster transparency, and reward ethical behavior. Most importantly, reform initiatives should prioritize the alignment of organizational culture with values of integrity, accountability, and public service.

While the study is situated in the context of Polri, its findings have broader implications for command institutions across the Global South. The dynamics of obedience, loyalty, and silence are not uniquely Indonesian but resonate across other hierarchical state organizations facing similar pressures of modernization, public accountability, and institutional inertia.

In conclusion, this study provides a critical and empirically grounded understanding of how obedience operates as both a stabilizing and destabilizing force in command institutions. Ethical transformation in such organizations depends not on dismantling hierarchy, but on embedding moral accountability within it. Only by recalibrating the institutional incentives that govern behavior—through ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and cultural change—can command institutions fulfill their public mandates with legitimacy and trust.

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