

Beyond "Slave Mentality": A Conceptual Review of Internalized Subordination and the Reproduction of Power

Jingyang Chao

New Bulgaria University, Department of music, Bulgaria, Sofia

ABSTRACT: "Slave mentality" is often used to describe blind obedience, dependence, and a lack of independent thought, but the phrase is too broad to serve as a clear academic concept. This paper begins with an original observation: dependence does not disappear when food and physical safety become easier to obtain. It often moves into work, status, belonging, recognition, and access to opportunity. A focused conceptual review of 17 foundational and recent sources was used to connect research on obedience, social influence, system justification, compensatory control, learned helplessness, social dominance, employee silence, psychological safety, and power. The analysis separates practical submission from internalized subordination and explains how repeated adjustment to authority may weaken trust in personal judgement. It also examines why some formerly subordinate individuals reproduce control after gaining limited authority. The paper proposes an Internalized Subordination-Compensatory Domination Cycle. The model does not claim that everyone has a fixed amount of "slave mentality," or that powerless people will later misuse power. It describes a conditional process shaped by dependence, low control, status insecurity, institutional rules, and reflection. Reflective autonomy and real accountability may interrupt the cycle.

KEYWORDS: internalized subordination, obedience, compensatory domination, power, critical consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Human control over animals often begins with basic needs. Food, water, safety, and space can shape behavior through reward and restriction. This comparison cannot directly explain human society. People are also influenced by language, identity, institutions, moral judgement, and self-awareness. Still, it raises a useful question: when direct dependence on food and physical protection becomes less visible, do dependence and submission disappear, or do they take another form?

In modern life, dependence often appears through work, income, status, belonging, reputation, and access to opportunity. A person may stay silent because open disagreement could damage a career or social position. Control does not always need force. It can work through rules, evaluation, informal pressure, and the fear of future punishment.

Not every act of obedience shows weakness. People sometimes submit because resistance carries a real cost. A worker may follow an unfair instruction to avoid losing employment. A student may remain silent because disagreement may bring punishment. These choices can be practical. The deeper problem begins when temporary submission changes how a person judges reality.

Milgram showed that ordinary people could continue carrying out troubling actions under institutional authority [1]. System justification theory explains why people may defend an existing system even when it works against their interests [2]. Compensatory control theory adds that weak personal control can increase reliance on external order [3]. More recent reviews show that social influence is shaped by group identity and by norms that are enforced or internalized [4,5]. In organizations, decisions to speak or remain silent also depend on perceived risk and psychological safety [6,7]. A later review of compensatory control makes an important qualification: loss of control does not produce one fixed response; people may turn to different beliefs or systems that restore order [8].

These theories explain why people obey, remain silent, or accept unequal systems. They do not fully explain what happens when a formerly powerless person gains authority. In many workplaces and social groups, some people who once had little voice become controlling after receiving limited power. They may first test what they can demand. If there is no effective limit, they may become harsher. Disagreement is treated as disrespect, and authority becomes a reason to stop questioning themselves.

Two questions will be present, when does practical submission become internalized subordination? Why do some formerly subordinate people repeat the same form of domination after gaining power? The paper does not claim that everyone has a fixed amount of "slave mentality." It examines a possible process and the conditions that may strengthen or interrupt it.



METHODOLOGY

This study used a focused conceptual review. It did not collect experimental, survey, or interview data and was not designed as a systematic review. The purpose was to connect theories that explain different parts of the same process rather than to estimate an overall effect size.

Targeted searches in Annual Reviews, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Crossref-linked publisher records, and university repositories. Search strings combined three groups of terms: (obedience OR conformity OR social influence) AND (authority OR hierarchy); (personal control OR compensatory control OR learned helplessness OR system justification); and (power OR status insecurity OR employee voice OR psychological safety) AND (domination OR aggression OR silence). Reference lists of major reviews were also checked for foundational studies.

Sources were retained when they introduced a major concept, reported a central empirical finding, or reviewed current evidence directly related to the proposed model. Sources were excluded when they used "slave mentality" only as a political insult, treated obedience as proof of low intelligence, or made broad claims without a clear theoretical basis. Seventeen books and journal articles published between 1956 and 2025 formed the final analytical set. Because the review was focused rather than systematic, no claim of exhaustive coverage is made and a PRISMA flow diagram was not used.

The selected material was compared across three questions: how external pressure produces submission, how submission may become internalized, and how a change in power may reproduce hierarchy. Internalized subordination and the Internalized Subordination-Compensatory Domination Cycle are working concepts developed in this paper. They are not established diagnoses or validated psychological scales.

RESULTS

The review produced three linked findings. Outward obedience must be separated from internal change. Long-term subordination may teach the rules of hierarchy without creating a commitment to equality. A later change in position can turn those learned rules into compensatory domination. These findings form the proposed cycle.

External submission and internalized subordination

The phrase "slave mentality" can refer to fear, dependence, conformity, passivity, poor judgement, or admiration of authority. A term that covers all these behaviors cannot explain why they happen. The first result of the analysis is therefore a distinction between outward submission and internalized subordination.

Kelman divided social influence into compliance, identification, and internalization [9]. Compliance occurs when a person acts to gain a reward or avoid punishment. Identification is linked to a valued relationship or group. Internalization occurs when an outside belief becomes part of the person's own value system. A worker may follow an order without agreeing with it. A student may repeat a teacher's view while privately rejecting it. These are forms of external submission, not proof of internalized subordination.

Conformity is also different from obedience. Asch showed that a unanimous group could push people to give answers that went against their own perception [10]. Some participants doubted themselves. Others knew the group was wrong but did not want to stand alone. Later reviews place this kind of influence within group identity and norm processes [4,5]. Public agreement does not always mean that private belief has changed.

Internalized subordination begins when repeated adjustment to authority changes personal judgement. The thought is no longer only, "It is unsafe to disagree." It becomes, "My disagreement may be wrong," or, "People in my position should not question those above them." The line between necessity and legitimacy starts to disappear. "I have to comply" becomes "the authority must be right."

Learned helplessness explains part of this change. Seligman and Maier found that repeated exposure to uncontrollable events could reduce later attempts to escape, even when escape became possible [11]. Yet helplessness and internalized subordination are not the same. A person may believe resistance is useless and still know that the system is unfair. Internalized subordination goes further: resistance may also come to seem improper.

System justification theory helps explain why people may defend systems that disadvantage them [2]. A stable system gives roles, explanations, and predictability. Admitting that years of obedience were unnecessary or harmful may be harder than

continuing to defend the same structure. Compensatory control theory adds that external order can become attractive when personal control feels weak [3,8]. A strict hierarchy reduces uncertainty and can also reduce the need to decide.

Internalized subordination is therefore defined here as a condition in which long-term dependence, low personal control, or authority pressure leads a person to treat unequal authority as natural, necessary, or impossible to change, while reducing the value of personal judgement even after direct pressure has weakened.

From subordination to compensatory domination

Internalized subordination is not the same as a wish to dominate. Social dominance orientation describes a preference for group inequality and hierarchy [12]. Some people support hierarchy without having been powerless. Others obey for years without wanting control over anyone. The narrower finding is that long-term subordination may teach a person how domination works, even if the person dislikes being dominated.

A subordinate person learns who may speak, who must explain, whose anger is accepted, and whose discomfort can be ignored. These rules may later become a model of power. Freire argued that oppression can enter the thinking of the oppressed [13]. Changing positions does not create freedom if the oppressor remains the only available image of strength. The hierarchy stays in place; only the person's location changes.

When a formerly subordinate person gains limited authority, several things may happen. The person may copy the only model of power that is familiar. Authority may also repair an earlier sense of weakness, making obedience from others proof of a new status. The hierarchy may become easier to accept once the person benefits from it.

Kipnis found that control over institutional resources changed how power holders treated less powerful participants [14]. Later work described power as increasing action and freedom from social limits, while low power increases caution and attention to threat [15]. Experiments also found that powerful participants whose competence had been threatened were more likely to denigrate partners [16]. These findings do not mean that power always corrupts. They show that insecurity and a change in position can remove limits that previously controlled behavior.

Compensatory domination can be used to describe excessive control used to repair earlier feelings of weakness, humiliation, or low status. Authority then serves two purposes: it manages others and protects the power holder's identity. Minor disagreement may cause a strong reaction because it feels like a return to earlier insignificance.

The link is conditional. Previous subordination does not by itself produce later domination. The outcome also depends on status security, the need for control, institutional permission, available models of leadership, and the person's ability to reflect on earlier experience.

The Internalized Subordination-Compensatory Domination Cycle

The six-stage model developed from the analysis is shown in Figure 1. The final stage reproduces dependence for other people and can begin the process again. The sequence is not automatic. People may stop at one stage, move backward, or leave the cycle. Reflection and institutional accountability may interrupt it at several points.

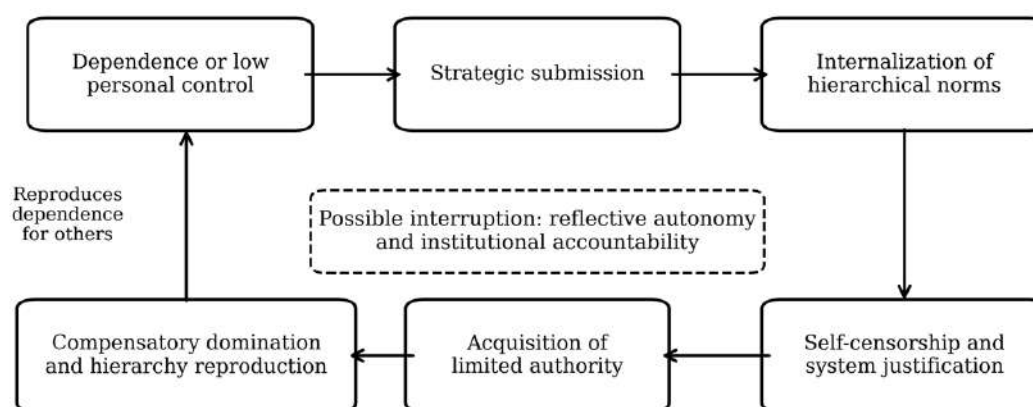


Figure 1. The Internalized Subordination-Compensatory Domination Cycle. The final stage reproduces dependence for others; reflective autonomy and institutional accountability may interrupt the process.



Three propositions follow from the model:

Proposition 1. Long-term exposure to high dependence and low personal control may increase the chance that practical submission becomes internalized subordination, especially when alternatives and social support are weak.

Proposition 2. Internalized subordination may make unequal authority appear normal, legitimate, or impossible to avoid.

Proposition 3. When a person who has internalized hierarchy gains limited authority, insecure status and a strong need for control may increase the chance of compensatory domination. Reflection and accountability may reduce this effect.

DISCUSSION

The main contribution it is to turn "slave mentality" from a moral label into a process. The process begins with dependence and practical submission, may move into self-censorship and system justification, and may later reappear as domination when a person's position changes. This keeps the force of the original idea without dividing people into naturally superior and inferior types.

The model also explains why outward behavior can be misleading. A quiet worker may be making a clear strategic choice rather than accepting the system. A strict manager may be following a role rather than compensating for past weakness. The proposed cycle concerns changes in judgement, not behavior alone. Future research must therefore examine how people explain authority, risk, and personal responsibility. And the cycle is not unavoidable, reflection may interrupt it, but reflection is more than thinking about personal experience. It requires a person to ask why a hierarchy appears natural, how fear and reward shaped earlier choices, and whether authority must depend on silence and control. Critical consciousness is useful here because it links reflection with the ability to recognize and challenge unequal conditions [17]. The concept is defined in different ways, so it should not be treated as one settled measure.

From here, reflective interruption has three parts: separating practical compliance from moral agreement, noticing when one's own behavior repeats an old hierarchy, and accepting disagreement without treating it as personal humiliation. Institutional accountability matters just as much. Recent reviews of employee voice and psychological safety show why clear channels for speaking up and lower interpersonal risk are important [6,7]. Transparent decisions and real consequences for misuse of power reduce the chance that insecurity becomes control.

The analysis also changes the idea of "awakening" another person. Telling someone that he or she has a "slave mentality" is unlikely to create independent thought. It may attack dignity and repeat the same hierarchy being criticized: one person places himself above another and claims the right to correct the other's mind. Asking questions and pointing out contradictions leaves more room for personal judgement. An outsider may disturb a person's life without being able to carry the consequences.

There are also several limitations, Obedience is not always harmful; cooperation, discipline, and compromise are often necessary. Low control does not always lead to submission or abuse. It may also lead to solidarity, resistance, and a stronger concern for fairness. Power does not affect everyone in the same way, and the proposed cycle has not been tested as a complete causal model. The paper also avoids a biological or genetic explanation. Animal training is only the starting comparison, not evidence that human submission is a simple form of conditioning.

Suffering alone does not teach a person how to use power well. Future qualitative work could examine how people describe the move from having little voice to supervising others. Quantitative studies could test whether low perceived control, system justification, authority submission, status insecurity, and social dominance orientation predict harsh decisions in workplace scenarios. Any such study must separate strategic obedience from real internalization.

CONCLUSION

Dependence does not disappear when basic survival becomes easier. It moves into employment, recognition, belonging, status, and access to institutions. Sometimes submission remains a practical choice. At other times it changes how people understand authority and themselves. This is where internalized subordination begins.

If a person later gains power while keeping the old meaning of hierarchy, domination may be repeated rather than rejected. The Internalized Subordination-Compensatory Domination Cycle offers one explanation for this change. Its central point is simple: suffering does not automatically teach freedom. Without reflection, other models of authority, and limits on power, liberation may be understood only as moving from the controlled side of a hierarchy to the controlling side.



REFERENCES

1. Milgram, S. Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 1963;67(4):371-378.
2. Jost, J.T., Banaji, M.R. The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 1994;33(1):1-27.
3. Kay, A.C., Whitson, J.A., Gaucher, D., Galinsky, A.D. Compensatory control: Achieving order through the mind, our institutions, and the heavens. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2009;18(5):264-268.
4. Spears, R. Social influence and group identity. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2021;72:367-390.
5. Wenzel, M., Woodyatt, L. The power and pitfalls of social norms. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2025;76:583-606.
6. Morrison, E.W. Employee voice and silence: Taking stock a decade later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. 2023;10:79-107.
7. Edmondson, A.C., Bransby, D.P. Psychological safety comes of age: Observed themes in an established literature. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. 2023;10:55-78.
8. Ponce de Leon, R., Kay, A.C. Political ideology and compensatory control mechanisms. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*. 2020;34:112-117.
9. Kelman, H.C. Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 1958;2(1):51-60.
10. Asch, S.E. Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*. 1956;70(9):1-70.
11. Seligman, M.E.P., Maier, S.F. Failure to escape traumatic shock. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 1967;74(1):1-9.
12. Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L.M., Malle, B.F. Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1994;67(4):741-763.
13. Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum; 2000.
14. Kipnis, D. Does power corrupt? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1972;24(1):33-41.
15. Keltner, D., Gruenfeld, D.H., Anderson, C. Power, approach, and inhibition. *Psychological Review*. 2003;110(2):265-284.
16. Cho, Y., Fast, N.J. Power, defensive denigration, and the assuaging effect of gratitude expression. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 2012;48(3):778-782.
17. Jemal, A. Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *The Urban Review*. 2017;49(4):602-626.

Cite this Article: Chao, J. (2026). Beyond "Slave Mentality": A Conceptual Review of Internalized Subordination and the Reproduction of Power. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 9(8), pp. 4371-4375. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i8-17>