

**The Impact of Social Identification with Leadership on Employee Cooperation with
Biomedical Corporate Corruption: A Phenomenological Study**

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STACEY LYNNE DICKENSHEETS NOVAK

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Abstract

In biomedical organizations, the interaction between destructive leadership, susceptible employees, and supportive environments can result in toxic workplaces, leading to significant financial losses annually and disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups. While most research has concentrated on leadership and organizational culture, the influence of employee behavior within corruption remains less thoroughly examined. The problem to be addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. This qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis examined the intricate lived experiences of seven former employees from a major private biomedical corporation prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice for corrupt practices. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and triangulation from public interviews and recorded depositions, the study sought to understand factors such as relational identification with leadership, collective identity, value alignment with leadership and group norms, and behavioral adaptation. Thematic coding and iterative analysis revealed that employees who supported unethical activities within biomedical firms exhibited diminished recognition of ethical dilemmas (moral insensitivity), experienced moral fatigue, and showed frequent negative emotions, potentially intensifying conforming behaviors. The lived experiences of employees reflected the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas. Participants' accounts were consistent with the dual agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership, which served as the study's theoretical framework. Notably, the research identified the critical role of identification not only with leadership but also among colleagues in promoting engaged followership. Team cohesion and connection contributed to supervisors' motivation to remain in ethically challenging environments, often as a means of safeguarding

their teams. Additionally, the concept of impresarioship was broadened to include perceptions of success independent of objective outcomes. Recommendations for practice and future research address strategies to protect employees against susceptible followership and explore how the dimensions of identification with leadership interact with evaluations of leadership effectiveness or serve as protection from destructive leadership. This research provides valuable insights into employees' roles as followers within workplaces shaped by destructive leadership and cultures prone to unethical conduct, which are risks relevant to any organization lacking robust governance and safeguards.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Toxic or corrupt workplace environments pose various global and organizational risks. Organizational scholars disagree on a single definition of corruption (García, 2019). Many scholars use Transparency International's definition as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International, 2016, p. 5). Bauhr (2012) divided corruption based on its motivation into need or greed corruption. The World Bank Group (2023) recognized various forms of corruption, including service providers' hidden misdeeds and highly publicized unethical acts of governmental and private organizations. Corporate corruption, in particular, persists because firms gain financial benefits (Ferris et al., 2021) despite the threat of penalties, hefty fines, and wide-ranging deleterious effects on society (Garrett, 2014).

Quantifying the impact of corruption is also challenging to define due to its complex, hidden, and potentially criminal nature (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024). Corporate corruption harms society at large and can hinder political and economic development (Bai et al., 2024). Corruption can erode societal trust in corporate regulation (Dorfleitner et al., 2022), consumer safety (Al-Zogbi et al., 2019), and worldwide financial security (Prechel, 2022). Corporate corruption threatens global health through food insecurity, unequal access, and environmental damage (Demeshko et al., 2024).

The healthcare sector is consistently considered one of the most corrupt industries in the world (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, 2017; U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). Informal payments, improper fiduciary relationships, fraud, the production of counterfeit medical supplies, mismanagement, theft, and the diversion of resources are the most common types of corrupt activities in the industry (Glynn, 2022). In fiscal year 2025, the United States government won or negotiated over \$6.8 billion in health-related

fraud (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). Shrank et al. (2019) calculated that between \$365–\$425 billion is wasted in the United States yearly in corrupt waste in healthcare. However, the impacts of corruption on public health are incalculable, as they include harm up to and including death (García, 2019). Moreover, corruption within the health sector disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, especially women, children, and impoverished people (Al Qudah et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2010).

Given the scale of corruption, Transparency International (2016) created a global program focused on decreasing corruption in the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors. The program focuses on corrupt practices and potential improvements within pharmaceutical research and development, manufacturing, registration, marketing, procurement, and distribution, as they are particularly susceptible to unethical activity. The program highlights a dearth of “data and understanding of corruption” (p. 28) as a key challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. The biomedical industry provides biotechnological, pharmaceutical, and diagnostic research, development, manufacturing, and distribution with the objective of improving healthcare (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 2022). The sector is highly complex, characterized by power inequalities, market uncertainties, and a mixture of public and private entities with varying motives (Mackey et al., 2016). These factors make the field highly vulnerable to corruption. Anti-corruption actions typically focus on detecting and controlling corruption. Based on the current literature, there is a scarcity of stakeholders dedicated to preventing corruption from occurring.

Unethical culture, immoral management, unjust decision-making, and unhealthy employee interactions are some of the factors that contribute to the evolution of toxic organizations that carry out corruption (Akinyele & Chen, 2025; Botez & Coteț, 2021). Despite

leaders often assuming responsibility in the wake of corporate scandals, organizations do not become toxic through leadership alone (Almeida et al., 2021; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Guedes Almeida et al., 2021; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Padilla et al. (2007) surmised that leaders, followers, and environmental factors converge to allow such toxicity. Likewise, Uhl-Bien and colleagues (2014) recognized that toxic organizations result from a process co-created by leaders, followers, and the conditions.

Although employees play a crucial role in toxic corporate activities, researchers have predominantly focused on leadership and organizational culture for decades while only recently starting to study followership (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Employees can, and do, cooperate in unethical behavior that benefits the organization or their leader (Almeida et al., 2021; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). The researchers identified this as unethical follower behavior (UFB). Followers participate in UFB by conforming to avoid conflict (Almeida et al., 2021) or colluding to support what they perceive to be a just or virtuous cause (Haslam & Reicher, 2017; Tourish & Willmott, 2023). Cooperative followers play a vital role in corruption by actively executing or not reporting an overall scheme (Tourish & Willmott, 2023). Based on a follower's motivations, recognition of power, level of resistance, and other characteristics, conformers can be further categorized into authoritarians, lost souls, and bystanders (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). At the same time, colluders can be regarded as acolytes or opportunists.

Social identity theory (SIT) of leadership (Hogg et al., 2012) demonstrates that leaders impact followers through their alignment of shared values, trust, fairness, and clear communication. Lee (2023) determined that employees who identify strongly with their leaders are likely to perform unethical acts to benefit them. Moreover, Ishaq et al. (2023) found that employees who identify more strongly with their leaders than with their organizations are more

likely to exhibit unethical behavior that hurts the organization. In recognition of the co-creation of leader-follower impact, Haslam et al. (2023) proposed a dual-agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership (DAMILEF). The authors stated that these co-creative efforts can produce a “world-changing social force” (p. 2). Therefore, the authors called for future research to theoretically inform the destructive activity co-created by followers and leaders and grounded in social identification.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. The healthcare sector is consistently considered to be one of the most corrupt industries in the world (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, 2017). Transparency International (2016) identifies the paucity of data about corruption as a major challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. Complicit employees are required to execute corporate corruption successfully (Mawritz et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007). Without a better understanding of cooperative followers, efforts to prevent corruption will fail, and corrupt organizations will continue to have a widespread impact (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). Society at large will continue to be harmed through threats to public health (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024) with vulnerable populations disproportionately hurt (Al Qudah et al., 2025).

Research has primarily focused on leadership and corporate culture, leaving the third crucial element, the role of employees in corruption, less understood (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Researchers have called for more studies about the influences on employee behavior as cooperative followers. Steele et al. (2024) noted the limitations in employees' sensemaking of unethical dilemmas. Yang et al. (2022) recommended studying morality-based emotions and

thinking to understand unethical follower behavior in the workplace. Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) suggested examining factors mediating employee behavior in response to immoral leader requests. Haslam et al. (2023) called for further research on the destructive activities co-created by followers and leaders, grounded in social identification.

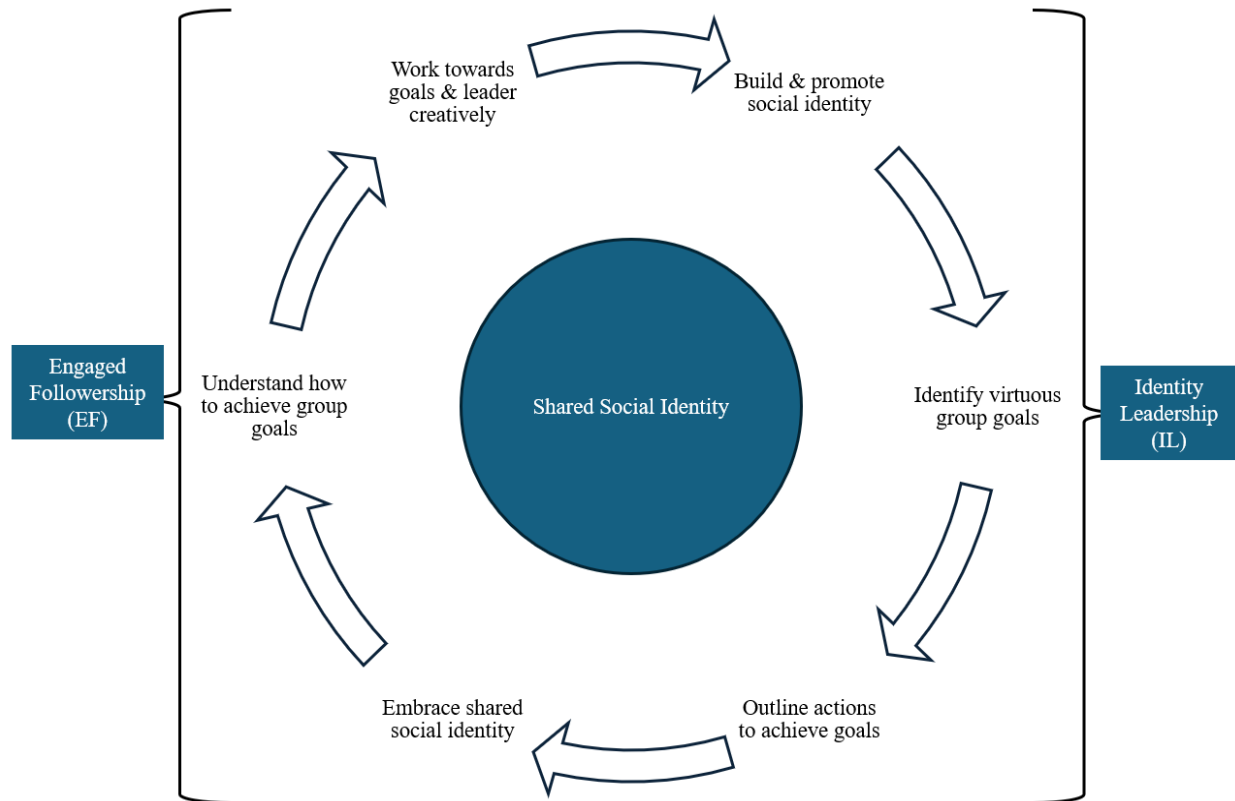
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design was used to explore employees' complex lived experiences (Farrell, 2020) during their involvement in unethical activity at their employer's behest. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with former employees of a biomedical corporation recognized for corrupt practices. I found participants through purposive sampling (Smith et al., 2022). Snowball sampling was attempted, but no participants were recruited in this manner. I gathered qualitative data by exploring about seven employees' descriptions of their involvement in fraudulent activity, including leadership cues and their related emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. I assessed employee transcripts from public interviews and court testimony as secondary data sources to promote triangulation (Bloomberg, 2023). Hermeneutic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes of the employees' experiences.

Introduction to Framework

The leadership process framework is a constructivist approach used to investigate followership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), and it was used in the current study as a foundation of the dual-agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership. This framework was referred to as DAMILEF for this dissertation. The social process and dynamic interactions

between leaders and followers are the foundation of the constructivist perspective. One of the core tenets of the leadership process is that leaders and followers “co-create leadership and its outcomes” (p. 99). To further explain this co-creation of outcomes, Haslam et al. (2019) proposed DAMILEF. As shown in Figure 1, the model presents that IL and EF are based on a shared social identity and cyclically build upon each other.



Note. Adapted from “Rethinking the Nature of Cruelty: The Role of Identity Leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment,” by S. A. Haslam, S. D. Reicher, & J. J. Van Bavel, 2019, *American Psychologist*, 74(7), p. 819. (<https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000443>). Copyright 2019 by American Psychological Association.

IL is characterized by four tenets: identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2014). The leader must represent the core ingroup, focus on the group's needs, and actively work towards those goals. The leader actively represents themselves as prototypical of the group and brandishes their ideas and actions as the manifestation of the group's beliefs (Figure 1). Lastly, the leader is an impresario of the group identity, guiding, but not directing, followers' actions to transform group value-driven visions into reality. EF is described as a state of being in which followers actively identify with a leader and their objectives and take action to work toward these goals (Reicher et al., 2012). Engaged followers embrace the shared social identity, understand the group objectives, and creatively and eagerly act to achieve these goals (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019).

Uhl-Bien and colleagues (2014) acknowledged that there cannot be leaders without followers, also known as employees (or former employees). This study investigated employees who participated in corrupt activities as followers. Examining the lived experiences of employees who socially identify with their leadership to co-create outcomes within corrupt corporations was the foundation of this study. During the interviews, participants were asked semi-structured, open-ended questions about their relationships with managers and corporate leaders, as well as their actions and perceptions of unethical activity within their workplace. I gained insight into the IL and EF within a corrupt workplace from these interviews.

Phenomenology focuses on understanding people's lived experiences from their perspective (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019), which are defined as the participants' "perceptions, thoughts, ideas, and experiences" (pp. 30–31). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a form of constructivist research (Laverly, 2003) based in the social construction of experiences.

Hermeneutics supports the ontological construct that multiple realities are possible when viewed through the lens of the participant. According to Bloomberg (2023), “the theoretical framework for phenomenological research is always phenomenology” (p. 90). Phenomenology is both a philosophical framework and a research method, and it is well-suited to produce the rich qualitative data necessary to understand the complexities of followership within a corrupt organization. Moreover, the study answered Uhl-Bien and colleagues’ (2014) call for qualitative research to explore the nature of the leadership process framework effectively.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

Qualitative research allows investigators to explore complex data in a deep manner (Yin, 2015) while examining the interplay of constructs that make up reality (Bloomberg, 2023). The research aimed to increase understanding of the behavior, thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of employees who cooperate with corrupt leaders. Qualitative research concentrates on such intricacies and complexity (Smith et al., 2022).

According to Smith (2011), phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and describe the lived experiences of individuals. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the design for this study. There are three foundations of IPA: (a) it is rooted in traditional phenomenology, focusing on the lived experience from the participant’s perspective; (b) the lived experience is analyzed and interpreted in the hermeneutic tradition; and (c) it is idiographic. In this study, hermeneutics was applied to participant interview transcripts and existing testimony and interviews of former employees. With its hallmark double hermeneutic objective (Smith et al., 2022), IPA aligns well with understanding how employees make sense of unethical dilemmas.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews of participants recruited through LinkedIn. According to the subject's preference, interviews were conducted over the telephone or via video teleconference (Heath et al., 2018). The sample size was expected to be less than 10 interviewees or until data saturation was reached (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). To achieve triangulation and bolster trustworthiness (Bloomberg, 2023), other additional data sources were also used (Billups, 2021). Data were collected from transcribed testimony from court trials and public employee interviews and documentation from the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

Three-phased analysis is a key feature of IPA (Miller et al., 2018). The data first underwent descriptive analysis to identify patterns and themes of each employee's lived experiences in their specific situation. Then, cross-subject analysis occurred. Finally, the lived experiences were interpreted through a hermeneutic lens. This research assessed a combination of divergence and convergence across respondents. In other words, the uniqueness of each case was retained while synthesizing patterns across them (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Research Questions

Transparency International (2016) identified the paucity of data about corruption as a significant challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. Several authors have noted a need for deep qualitative research (Gruda et al., 2023; Somers, 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) to understand the underlying mechanisms of followership behavior. SIT (Hogg et al., 2012) presents that leaders impact followers through their alignment of shared values, trust, fairness, and clear communication. There have been calls for future research to increase understanding of the impact of followers' identification with unethical leaders (Haslam et al., 2022; Tourish & Willmott, 2023). Some researchers have recommended further research into employees'

sensemaking while cooperating with unethical leaders they identify with (Mesdaghinia et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2024). Therefore, the following research questions were investigated.

RQ1

What are the lived experiences of employees within the United States who support unethical activities in biomedical corporations?

RQ2

How do the lived experiences of employees in the United States reflect the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations?

Significance of the Study

Organizations do not become toxic through just one element of the toxic triangle, that is, through leadership, followers, or environment (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). However, the focus of research on destructive leadership (DL) (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023) and, to a lesser extent, organizational culture (Di Stefano et al., 2019), has resulted in a comparative disparity of theoretical and practical knowledge surrounding followership. This study helped address the literature gap related to corporate followership.

Not everyone in an unhealthy organization is prone to the effects of destructive leaders; some will voluntarily leave (Li et al., 2024), become whistleblowers (Oelrich & Chwolka, 2024), or convert to noncompliance (Bandura et al., 1996). Cooperative followers must be studied to elucidate the employee's lived experience and decision-making during corrupt activities. Examining these susceptible followers from the colluder and conformer lens provided valuable insight into their role in corrupt organizations. This insight increased the understanding of followers' emotional state, thinking, and, ultimately, their behavior in unethical situations.

The role of an employee's social identification with a leader is understood to be crucial in EF (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019). DAMILEF has been generally applied to leadership in politics and during crisis. Applying DAMILEF within the biomedical corporate sphere will provide a novel perspective to an industry in which corruption is common, and the effects can be highly detrimental. The learnings from this research can be applied to prevent or mitigate complicit follower behavior that is necessary for unhealthy corporations to thrive.

Definitions of Key Terms

Biomedical

The biomedical industry provides biotechnological, pharmaceutical, and diagnostic research, development, manufacturing, and distribution with the objective of improving healthcare (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 2022).

Corporate Corruption

Corporate corruption is a state and process characterized by the misuse of power by an employee or representative with the goal of personal gain or advantage to the organization (Castro et al., 2020).

Toxic Organization

A toxic organization is an institution in which the culture tolerates insidious and ubiquitous “disruptive, destructive, exploitive, dysfunctional, and abusive” leadership behaviors (Walton, 2008, p. 9).

Unethical Leadership

Unethical leadership is defined as “behaviors conducted and decisions made by organizational leaders that are illegal and/or violate moral standards, and those that impose

processes and structures that promote unethical conduct by followers” (Brown & Mitchell, 2010, p. 588).

Summary

Toxic corporations can negatively affect society worldwide (Bai et al., 2024; Prechel, 2022). Biomedical firms can compromise public health, disproportionately affecting vulnerable patients globally (Demeshko et al., 2024), despite the risks of billions of dollars in fines and lawsuit settlements (Garrett, 2014). While leaders often take the blame after corporate scandals, organizations do not become toxic through leadership alone (Almeida et al., 2021; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Page & Mgwenya, 2023). Toxic organizations are co-created by leaders, followers, and the culture – the so-called toxic triangle (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Large-scale corruption is only possible with cooperative employees' help (Tourish & Willmott, 2023), so understanding followers' complex roles in toxic organizations is necessary to prevent corruption. Despite employees' crucial role in toxic corporate activities, leadership and organizational culture research has been prevalent for decades, while followership study is relatively nascent (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

The study used a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological approach to analyze the experiences of former employees of biomedical companies that engaged in or witnessed unethical activities. These experiences were examined within the DAMILEF framework. Applying DAMILEF within the biomedical corporate sphere will provide a novel perspective on corruption within the industry. Deep insight into followers' social identification with a leader and experiences during unethical situations advanced knowledge of followership theory. Increased knowledge potentially yielded more comprehensive prevention and mitigation of employee participation in corrupt corporate activities, reducing its widespread impact.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This purpose of this study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. The healthcare sector is consistently considered one of the most corrupt industries in the world (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, 2017). Transparency International (2016) identified the paucity of data about corruption as a major challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. The problem addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations.

Despite leaders often assuming responsibility in the wake of corporate scandals, organizations do not become toxic through leadership alone (Almeida et al., 2021; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Page & Mgwenya, 2023; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). According to the toxic triangle theory, to create destructive leadership (DL), there is “a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental factors that make destructive leadership possible” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 176). All three parts are necessary. That is, a leader without followers is not leading anyone. Toxic leaders cannot influence susceptible followers (SFs) in a healthy environment. Moreover, a conducive environment will not turn toxic if the leaders and followers within it do not take it in that direction.

DL does not have a single definition (Padilla et al., 2007). DL is regarded as a phenomenon that is seldom wholly destructive and involves a coercive, controlling, leader-centric orientation. Krasikova et al. (2013) added that destructive leaders damage organizations by encouraging followers to engage in unethical actions. Destructive leadership may also intentionally or accidentally harm followers and society at large (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

Batchelor et al. (2023) added that DL comprises both acts of commission and omission. Finally, Shaw et al. (2011) described four attributes of DL: (a) tyrannical behavior, such as arrogance, obstinance, and meanness; (b) laziness or incompetence; (c) high emotionality, including compulsivity and lack of self-control; and (d) carelessness or emotionally unintelligent interactions in the workplace.

DL is recognized as both a process and an outcome that requires three components (Padilla et al., 2007). A healthy organizational culture discourages DL by encouraging whistleblowing and promoting ethical and fair processes (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). However, certain situations become conducive to DL due to instability, perceptions of threat, cultural tendencies, and the absence of checks and balances (Padilla et al., 2007). Research on DL has focused on leadership (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023) and, to a lesser extent, organizational culture (Di Stefano et al., 2019), resulting in a comparative disparity of theoretical and practical knowledge surrounding susceptible followership, the third crucial element of DL. Complicit employees are required to execute corporate corruption successfully (Mawritz et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007). Without a better understanding of cooperative followers, efforts to prevent corruption will fail, and corrupt organizations will continue to have a widespread impact (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023).

Not everyone in an unhealthy organization is prone to the effects of destructive leaders; some will voluntarily leave (Li et al., 2024), become whistleblowers (Oelrich & Chwolka, 2024), or convert to noncompliance (Bandura, 1999). However, some employees can, and do, cooperate in unethical behavior that benefits the organization or their leader (Almeida et al., 2021; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). The researchers identified this as unethical follower behavior (UFB).

Cooperative followers play a vital role in corruption by actively executing or not reporting an overall scheme (Tourish & Willmott, 2023).

SFs can be categorized according to their alignment with DL into conformers and colluders (Padilla et al., 2007). Conformers follow out of fear (Padilla et al., 2007) or to avoid conflict (Almeida et al., 2021). Conformers fear their destructive leaders and comply with them to avoid the consequences of not doing so. Based on a follower's motivations, recognition of power, level of resistance, and other characteristics, conformers can be further categorized into authoritarians, lost souls, and bystanders (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). In contrast, colluders deliberately engage with their unethical leaders. Colluders may align for personal gain (Padilla et al., 2007) or to support what they perceive to be a just or virtuous cause (Haslam & Reicher, 2017; Tourish & Willmott, 2023). Colluders can be further defined as acolytes or opportunists (Thoroughgood et al., 2012).

Freud (as cited in Kernberg, 2020) described the changes that can occur within a large group led by DL. These shifts include (a) reduced individual judgment and rational thinking; (b) a sense of power based on mass, mutual identification with others; (c) identification with a powerful leader who is idolized or feared; (d) reliance on the leader to make decisions and release from that responsibility; and (e) release from the consequences of their actions and moral constraints. Volkan (2004, as cited in Kernberg, 2020) expanded these theories and coined the phrase large group regression to describe the phenomena. This regression includes rallying around a destructive leader, thoughtlessly following their lead, and creating strong in and out-groups to protect against perceived threats.

Haslam and Reicher (2012) deemed followers' identification with leadership or a virtuous cause as engaged followership (EF) and identified this identification as a source of

tyrannical behaviors. The authors later evolved their work into a dual agency model of identity leadership and EF (DAMILEF). This literature review begins by describing the two theoretical frameworks of the study: DAMILEF and phenomenology. The DAMILEF framework served as the primary framework for the investigation. Phenomenology, both a philosophical framework and research method, produces rich qualitative data (Bloomberg, 2023) essential to understanding followership in corrupt organizations. The chapter continues by exploring followership theory and typology, then defining corporate corruption, examining it within the biomedical industry, and reviewing the factors enabling corruption. The chapter proceeds with a review of followers as one of those key factors. Finally, unethical follower behavior and its antecedents are discussed through various perspectives, including social, cognitive and moral lenses.

Documentation

This literature review is based on the current and seminal research on corporate corruption, organizational leadership, and followership behavior. Since October of 2023, I have used the National University NavigatorSearch engine (formerly Roadrunner) to search the following databases: APA PsycInfo, Business Source Complete, Credo Reference, Directory of Open Access Journals, Ebook Central, EBSCOhost Databases, Emerald Insight, Gale, HeinOnline, Nexis Uni, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, SAGE Journals, SAGE Knowledge, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Statista, Taylor & Francis Online, Web of Knowledge, Wiley Online Library. Google Scholar was also utilized. The following is a list of the key search terms: *leader, destructive leadership, tyrannical leadership, authoritarian leadership, identity leadership, prototypicality, toxic triangle, obedience, ethical decision-making, workplace deviant behavior follower, engaged followership, unethical, susceptible,*

collusion, complicit, cognitive dissonance, moral disengagement, moral fatigue, organization, corporate, corruption, healthcare, biomedical, pharmaceutical, leader-member exchange, social identity, phenomenology, and integrative phenomenological analysis. Appendix A contains additional details about the literature search terms.

I used Web of Science and the Google Scholar “cited by” feature to identify work related to seminal research, locate articles published more than five years ago, and monitor newly published work citing essential articles. I conducted searches by reading articles and examining relevant references cited within the articles. I prioritized peer-reviewed publications but included gray literature, such as government reports or investigative findings, and trade publications, such as *Harvard Business Review*, to thoroughly examine the literature. I accessed unavailable publications through the inter-library loan processes at National University and my local public library. I used a combination of Microsoft Excel, National University Library NavigatorSearch’s student folders, RefWorks and Zotero to manage the search strategy, saved searches, saved alerts, tagging, and citations.

Framework

The dissertation's theoretical framework guides the investigation from start to finish and provides a foundation for the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions (Bloomberg, 2023). The theoretical framework bolsters the significance of the work within its discipline, provides a perspective to analyze data, and offers assumptions and boundaries for the interpretation of findings. The study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: DAMILEF and phenomenology.

Dual Agency Model of Identity Leadership And Engaged Followership (DAMILEF)

A person's agency, aligned with the construct of free will, is their capability to think, feel, and behave on their own accord (Wilson & Chace, 2024). Agency can occur at an individual level and be combined into group action. Followers traditionally have been stereotyped as passive subordinates (Orzolek, 2020) who carry out duties according to a leader's whims (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) or mindlessly obey orders (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo et al., 1971). However, this obedience to authority model has been reassessed (Haslam & Reicher, 2012, 2017). These researchers acknowledged the follower's agency as a crucial determinant of their behavior, which is mediated by identifying with the authority figure and their noble cause.

Uhl-Bien and colleagues (2014) created the leadership process framework as a constructivist approach to investigate followership. The social process and dynamic interactions between leaders and followers are the foundations of the constructivist perspective. One of the core tenets of the leadership process is that leaders and followers "co-create leadership and its outcomes" (p. 99). To further explain this co-creation of outcomes, Haslam et al. (2019) proposed DAMILEF. As shown in Figure 1, the DAMILEF presents that IL and EF are based on a shared social identity and cyclically build upon each other.

Identity Leadership and Engaged Followership. IL is a social influence process focused on a leader "representing, promoting, crafting, and embedding followers' group identity" (Milesi, 2022, p. 886). To foster IL, leaders typically apply four approaches: identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). The leader must represent the core ingroup, focus on the group's needs, and actively work towards those goals. The leader actively represents themselves as prototypical of the group and brandishes their ideas and actions as the manifestation of the

group's beliefs (Figure 1). Lastly, the leader is an impresario of the group identity, guiding, but not directing, followers' actions to transform group value-driven visions into reality. The four principles of IL are empirically distinct (Milesi, 2022), with identity entrepreneurship being the most strongly associated with group identification.

EF is described as a state in which followers actively identify with a leader and their vision and take action to achieve these goals (Reicher et al., 2012). Engaged followers embrace the shared social identity, understand the group objectives, and creatively and eagerly act to achieve these goals (Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2019). Individuals who exercise their free will to engage in activities experience a sense of autonomy and related intrinsic motivation (Peyton et al., 2019). Engaged followers are more likely to actively participate in achieving particular outcomes and may act to dissuade a leader who attempts to pursue paths that are opposite the organizational goals (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

IL can also have positive influences in the workplace. For example, IL has been shown to positively correlate with team resilience and performance (Fransen et al., 2020). The IL element of entrepreneurship reduces employee turnover intention (Steffens et al., 2018), burnout, and loneliness at work (Krug et al., 2021). Moreover, Krug et al. (2021) and Steffens et al. (2018) also found that entrepreneurship elevates job satisfaction.

However, there can be drawbacks to IL and EF. Reicher et al. (2012) found that identification with a leader strongly predicts obedient behavior, albeit amid moral discord. Despite this conflict, the study participants often chose to carry out unethical orders because of their identification with an authority figure or to advance a noble cause. Milesi (2022) found that EFs may seek IL so vigorously that they will accept or even augment a toxic workplace. Batchelor et al. (2023) found that the IL components of prototypicality, entrepreneurship, and

impresarioship correlated positively with overly emotional DL. Likewise, prototypicality increases followership and a person's obedience, even in situations a one finds aversive, if they believe their actions are advancing a noble cause (Birney et al., 2023).

Social Identity Approach to Leadership. The social identity approach to leadership combines two theories: social identity theory (SIT) and social categorization theory (SCT) (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). Social identity refers to the aspects of a person's self-concept defined by the groups they consider themselves to be part of (Tajfel, 1975). A central assumption of SIT is that people in social situations identify themselves both as individuals and as members of one or more groups. Individuals evaluate the groups they identify with by comparing their associations to other groups, and they want their in-group to be distinct from other groups in a positive way (Tajfel & Turner, 2010). Since people aspire for a positive self-image, if one's social identity is unsatisfactory, the person will leave the group or attempt to change the group's characteristics.

SCT refers to a combination of three assessments individuals perform to understand their social identity: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 2010). Social categorization is a method by which individuals group people based on relatively stable characteristics (Ellemers et al., 2004). Group members impose social categories with meaning in a process called social categorization. Categorization typically results in understanding how groups are separated, and differences may vary between situations. Social identification is how someone recognizes themselves as a group representative (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Once identified with a group, people may model their actions or embrace beliefs according to the group's guidelines. Most people identify with various groups, so individuals may adopt multiple identities depending on the circumstance.

Scholars argue that social identification within a group is crucial for the existence of leadership and followership (Ellemers et al., 2004). Social identification promotes group cohesion and cooperation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A sense of belonging within the workplace increases employee satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty (Mumcu, 2024). Individuals who see themselves as group members work towards collective goals (Haslam & Reicher, 2016). Additionally, identification with a group is maintained through group successes and failures. As an approach to leadership, IL allows leaders to foster social identification within a group by embodying the group identity (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019).

Justification of the DAMILEF Theoretical Framework. DAMILEF has been applied to understanding conformity, obedience, political leadership, and corporate scandal. The model has been used to describe the effectiveness of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's progressive Republicanism and Nelson Mandela's anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Haslam & Reicher, 2016). Haslam and Reicher (2012) applied DAMILEF to the commission of atrocities by World War II Nazis. The model has been used to describe the 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol (Haslam et al., 2023). Uysal et al. (2022) used DAMILEF as a foundation for their integrative social model of populist leadership to study populism. Finally, Birney et al. (2024) argued that DAMILEF could help explain the corporate scandals of Enron's collapse, Volkswagen's emissions-test fraud, and NewsCorp's hacking and bribery practices. Applying DAMILEF within the biomedical corporate sphere will provide a novel perspective to an industry where corruption is common, and the effects can be highly detrimental.

The fields of leadership and followership are vast but cannot be studied independently, as there cannot be leaders without followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The DAMILEF theoretical framework allows the exploration of followers and how their life experiences are influenced by

leadership from a social identity lens. However, cognitive and moral perspectives are often interwoven with social identity, so they were examined within that context in the current study. Other followership frameworks could have also been applied unilaterally. One alternative was the morality-based framework built on moral awareness, moral dissonance, and moral disengagement to describe why followers remain loyal to or leave toxic leaders (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021). Social influence theory was another possible framework. This theory can be used to understand that when people engage in unethical behavior, their peers are likelier to do the same (Wetmiller, 2022).

Follower characteristics are also important, as destructive leaders target susceptible followers predominantly based on their performance instead of their personalities (Mackey, 2021). Once a relationship is established, the follower plays an essential role in maintaining and growing the toxic leader's impact. Constructs such as followers' self-concept (Zeng et al., 2023), self-esteem (Mercadante et al., 2023), and personality traits (Batchelor et al., 2023; Gruda et al., 2023) may exacerbate or impede the growth of toxicity. These frameworks may be revisited during the analysis and interpretation of results.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach and theoretical framework that seeks to understand and describe the lived experiences of individuals (Bloomberg, 2023). According to Bloomberg, "the theoretical framework for phenomenological research is always phenomenology" (p. 90). Phenomenology focuses on understanding peoples' lived experiences from their perspective (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019), which are defined as the participants' "perceptions, thoughts, ideas, and experiences" (p. 30-31). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the type of phenomenology that was used as one of the frameworks of the

current study. According to Smith (2011), there are three foundations of IPA: (a) IPA is rooted in traditional phenomenology, focusing on the lived experience from the participant's perspective; (b) the lived experience is analyzed and interpreted in the hermeneutic tradition; and (c) IPA is idiographic.

In the early 1900s, traditional phenomenology emerged when the philosopher and scientist Edmund Husserl defined phenomenology as a careful, deliberate, and descriptive inquiry of human consciousness (Smith et al., 2022). Husserl (1913/1982) argued that by identifying the essential characteristics of an experience, those qualities would transcend a specific circumstance and might offer insights into the similar experiences others have. Husserl described the intentional assessment of experience as a phenomenological attitude. Husserl used the techniques of bracketing and eidetic reduction to separate everyday distractions and preconceptions to elucidate the essence of an experience (Londen et al., 2023).

As a student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger separated himself from his teacher by focusing on interpreting experience rather than describing events (Smith et al., 2022). Heidegger defined phenomenology in terms of hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. For Heidegger (1962), phenomenology was a method, rather than a philosophy, used to understand the state of being, which he called Dasein. Dasein is inherently temporal; an individual is situated in the present but influenced by the past and anticipation of the future. Moreover, people are immersed in a world of culture, values, and objects influencing their experiences. When interpreting experiences, Heidegger acknowledged that our preconceptions cannot be fully decoupled from our interpretation of an experience (Smith, 2011). Heidegger promoted the focus on the phenomenon being studied while interrogating prior experience and assumption to detect the manifest and latent attributes of experience.

Expanding the construct of interpretation, IPA applies a “double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 133). A type of non-linear, reflexive logic known as the hermeneutic circle is a hallmark of IPA. The hermeneutic circle represents the concept that to comprehend any part of an experience, one must see the whole, and to understand the comprehensive, one must know the parts. IPA is also idiographic, focusing on each participant or case. The researcher seeks to deeply understand a person’s experience in a specific circumstance. However, the investigator also acknowledges that phenomena are rarely unique to one person. IPA supports the ontological construct that multiple realities are possible when viewed through the lens of the participant (Harrison, 2023). Therefore, high-quality IPA studies combine divergence and convergence (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In other words, the researcher must retain the uniqueness of each case while synthesizing patterns across them.

As a foundation, IPA has been widely used in psychology, especially health, cognitive, counseling, social, and educational psychology (Smith & Nizza, 2022). However, the IPA founders encourage its use in more disciplines and promote it for use anywhere researchers want to understand the human experience. Like all frameworks, IPA has a few constraints that must be considered. First, IPA relies on rich data, so the participant must feel comfortable and be forthcoming. The research can only assume that the participant is honest in their responses. Finally, the researcher never has direct access to a participant’s memories. Furthermore, the narratives provided by the participant have already undergone a degree of interpretation by the participant and should be investigated as such.

Followership

Followership is a dual concept that cannot be separated from leadership. Kellerman (2008) asserted that leaders and followers are intertwined that examining one without the other is “pointless” (p. 60). Despite this interconnection, leadership research has been prevalent for decades, while followership study is relatively nascent (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020; Gallegos et al., 2024; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Zawawi et al. (2024) maintained that followership is a concept that cannot be separated from leadership, defining followership as the attitudes and actions of “those who are involved with and work to assist leaders in accomplishing organizational goals successfully” (p. 1295).

Followership Theory

Followership was studied initially and most understood based on implicit leadership theories (Riggio et al., 2008). Implicit leadership theories suggest that followers recognize leaders based on shared traits and behaviors, making leadership collaborative. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) recognized the lack of research focused on followership and defined followership theory (FT) as “the study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process” (p. 84). While describing FT, Uhl-Bien and colleagues defined two theoretical frameworks from which followership can be studied: the leadership process (LP) and reversing the lens. These perspectives allow examination of the follower’s role, characteristics, behavior, and outcomes.

The LP framework is a constructivist approach used to investigate the dynamic interactions of leaders and followers that culminate in outcomes. The core tenets of the LP are (a) roles can shift and (b) leaders and followers “co-create leadership and its outcomes” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 99). Reversing the lens focuses on exploring how followers see and portray their roles. Instead of seeing leaders as the source of outcomes, this approach centers on the

followers' influence on outcomes through (a) characteristics like motivation, skills, emotions, and role orientation; (b) behaviors like complying, supporting, resisting, and guiding; and (c) followership outcomes at the individual, dyad, team, or organizational level.

As described briefly in the theoretical framework, SIT (Hogg et al., 2012) acknowledges the interplay of leaders with followers. SIT presents that leaders impact followers by aligning shared values, trust, fairness, and clear communication. A leader gains power and influence due to their prototypicality of the group (Hogg, 2008). As followers identify with the group, they conform to the group through depersonalization, which builds upon itself. As this progresses, followers increasingly identify with the group and the leader.

Followership Typology

Since 1965, there have been at least four defined models of follower categorization. Zaleznik described the importance of followership and pioneered the field (Kellerman, 2008). Zaleznik was the first to categorize followers, although he focused on ineffective employees rather than followers holistically. Using two criteria on a spectrum, submission versus dominance and passivity versus activity, Zaleznik identified followers as withdrawn, masochistic, compulsive, and impulsive.

Kelley was the first to target followers (rather than leaders) as readers of his work (Kellerman, 2008). Kelley categorized followers into five types based on dimensions of critical thinking and active engagement in the workplace. Kelley (1992) called these followership styles: passive, conformist, alienated, pragmatic, and exemplary followers. Chaleff (1997) named five dimensions of "courageous followership" (p. 4) based on two continua: the inclination to challenge leadership and the level of support provided to leadership. Chaleff summarized these dimensions as the courage to assume responsibility, courage to serve, courage to challenge,

courage to participate in transformation, and courage to take moral action. The first four dimensions happen within a group, while the last occurs outside the group. Based on these courageous elements, Chaleff described four kinds of followers. Followers who support their leadership are implementers and partners, while those who do not support their leadership are deemed to be resources and individualists. Partners and individualists are likely to challenge leaders, while implementers and resources are not. Kelley's model is regarded as a foundational theory of followership typology (Arshad et al., 2024).

Kellerman (2008) expanded on the Zaleznik, Kelley, and Chaleff models. Based on the level of engagement with their leaders, Kellerman identified followers as isolators, bystanders, participants, activists, and diehards. Kellerman describes leadership, followership, and context as equal partners according to their influence on organizational outcomes. Kellerman went beyond studying the interaction of leaders and followers in relation to organizational performance. Kellerman posited that "bad" leadership (or followership) is ineffective, unethical, or both. Kellerman contended that unimpeded "bad" leadership (followership) inevitably progresses to "worse" leadership (followership) (Kellerman, 2024).

Corporate Corruption

There is no consensus about a single definition of corporate corruption (García, 2019). The term is so difficult to define that the United Nations (UN) lists activities indicating corruption instead of trying to define the term (Gaitonde et al., 2016). Based on the UN's indicators, Gaitonde and colleagues defined corruption as "the abuse or complicity in abuse, of public or private position, power or authority to benefit oneself, a group, an organisation [sic] or others close to oneself; where the benefits may be financial, material, or non-material" (p. 10). Glynn (2022) added that corruption may be legal or illegal, either civilly or criminally. There is

agreement that corruption has broad-reaching impact and is a “scourge” that must be confronted (Diagana & Diagne, 2023).

Quantifying the impact of corruption is challenging to define due to its complex, hidden, and potentially criminal nature (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024). Corporate corruption harms society at large in myriad ways, such as damaging social equality and the environment (Demeshko et al., 2024). Corporate corruption threatens global health through food insecurity, unequal access, and environmental damage (Demeshko et al., 2024). Corruption can also hinder political and economic development (Bai et al., 2024) and democratic practices (Bakir, 2020). Corruption can erode societal trust in corporate regulation (Dorfleitner et al., 2022), consumer safety (Al-Zogbi et al., 2019), and global financial security (Prechel, 2022).

Corporate toxicity can also have deleterious effects on the organizations themselves. The negative implications for employees’ physical and mental health are rampant under DL (Bakker et al., 2014). Employees of unethical businesses reported statistically significant decreased job satisfaction and engagement, increased stress-related time off, and a reluctance to share their knowledge with colleagues (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021). Employees may engage in workplace deviant behaviors that target their co-workers which include gossiping, excluding, and bullying. Deviant behaviors such as theft, sabotage, or destruction of property can also impact the organization (Di Stefano et al., 2019). Employee engagement and organizational profitability are directly linked (Harter et al., 2002) and suffer through reduced team cohesion, trust, and employee commitment (Bang & Midelfart, 2017). Team effectiveness and productivity decrease while turnover increases, impacting the bottom line (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). Furthermore, many of these conditions promote deviant behaviors, so the cycle continues (Zappalà et al., 2022). According to a global survey of over 75,000 employees in 42 countries, 65% observed ethical

misconduct (a record high since 1994) (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2023). In the United States alone, 53% reported unethical behavior, following a growth pattern since 2000.

Organizational scandals can take myriad forms, including financial misconduct, product safety mistakes, intentional tampering, customer-relations problems, employee treatment, and environmental debacles (Groysberg et al., 2016). Volkswagen conceded they had designed software in order for passenger vehicles to release 40-times less dangerous emissions during testing than when operating normally, costing the firm \$14.7 billion in penalties (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Kobe Steel plants admitted they fabricated their durability and strength testing results, leading to global safety concerns from Boeing and Airbus to Nissan and Toyota to Japan's famous bullet trains (Al-Zogbi et al., 2019). After more than 20 fatalities and 240 injuries occurred, Takata was sentenced to one billion in penalties because the firm knowingly concealed the failed test results of its safety airbags (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).

Facebook was penalized \$5 billion (U. S. Federal Trade Commission, 2019) for providing user data to Cambridge Analytica, which then deployed manipulated algorithms to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and U.K. Brexit referendum (Bakir, 2020). In 2021, Boeing settled with the U.S. Department of Justice for more than \$2.5 billion for a conspiracy to defraud the Federal Aviation Administration and aviation safety violations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a). Recently, Futures Exchange, the world's third largest cryptocurrency company, was fined \$12.7 billion for investor fraud (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024b). As a repeat offender, Wells Fargo has paid \$25 billion in fines since 2012 for five separate consumer protection violations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018, 2020a, 2022b; U.S. Department of Treasury Comptroller of the Currency, 2013). These examples illustrate the financial risk

corporations are willing to take and the broad reach of corruption, negatively impacting the environment, public safety, democratic practice, and financial security, and society at large.

Corporate Corruption in the Biomedical Industry

This study focused on corruption in the healthcare industry. The healthcare sector is consistently considered one of the most corrupt industries in the world (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, 2017; U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). Experts estimate that 10 to 25% of worldwide health expenditure is lost to systemic, embedded corruption (García, 2019). In the United States, one glaring example is the opioid crisis that was fueled by aggressive marketing and misleading claims from the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma, which falsely promoted opioids as safe and non-addictive, leading to widespread overprescription and addiction (Gagnon, 2022). Purdue Pharma pled guilty to fraud and kickback conspiracies, admitting to incentivizing and misleading physicians to prescribe more opioids despite knowing the risks. Purdue Pharma paid \$5.5 billion in federal fines and criminal forfeiture (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020b).

In fiscal year 2025, the United States government won or negotiated over \$6.8 billion in health-related fraud (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). Brooks (2024) confirms that corruption, along with fraud, abuse, and error are significant drivers of healthcare costs. The latest calculation available calculated that between \$365–\$425 billion is wasted in the United States yearly in corrupt waste in healthcare (Shrank et al., 2019). However, the impacts of corruption on health are incalculable, as they include harm up to and including death (Brooks, 2024; García, 2019).

Corruption in healthcare can be studied by functional area, by the corruption typology, and by the actors involved at the institutional or individual level. Figure 2 shows eight functional areas of healthcare: (a) system governance, (b) system regulation, (c) research and development,

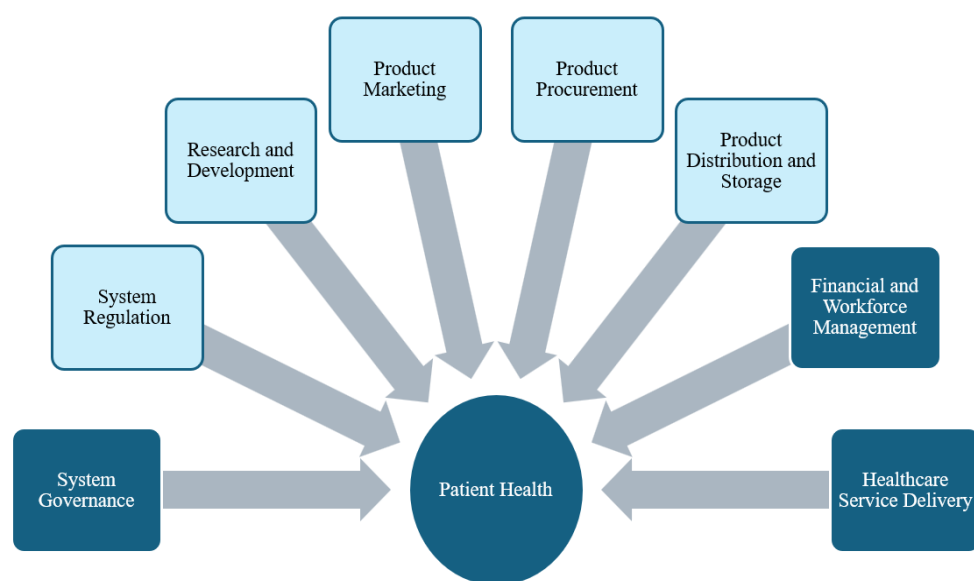
(d) product marketing, (e) product procurement, (f) product distribution and storage, (g) financial and workforce management, and (h) healthcare delivery (Transparency International, 2016).

Transparency International also defines six types of corruption in the healthcare industry:

improper relationships, theft and diversion of resources, fraud, informal payments, counterfeit products. Glynn (2022) and Nair et al. (2017) distinguish four groups of actors which all impact patient healthcare: policymakers, payors, suppliers, and providers. Figure 3 displays the types of corruption in healthcare with the actors who are most involved in each category.

Figure 2

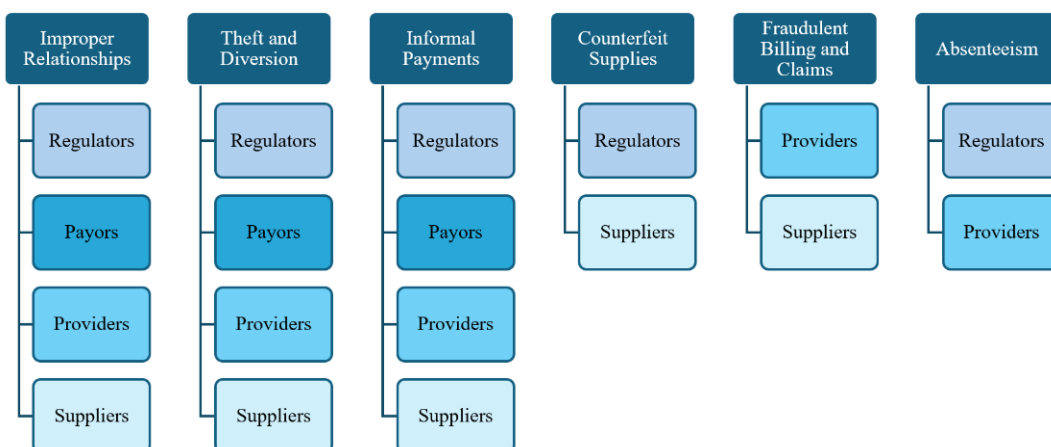
The Functional Areas of Healthcare



Note. Light blue boxes indicate the areas that biomedical suppliers may most affect patient health.

Figure 3

Types of Corruption in Healthcare With the Actors Most Involved in Each



Note. Biomedical suppliers are commonly involved in five of the six types of corruption.

Laws targeting fraud, abuse, and corruption are defined at the individual level (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024). However, institutional corruption is typically far more destructive (Thompson, 2013). Mungiu-Pippidi (2013) defined the causes of corruption at an institutional level as the difference between opportunities and deterrents. Group or community expectations and legal regulations are good deterrents. García (2019) defined three opportunities for corruption in healthcare: the unequal power dynamic between providers and patients with insufficient governance, monetary or social pressures, and a culture that allows corruption. When the opportunities for corruption outweigh its deterrents, the likelihood corruption will occur is higher.

Another approach to understanding corruption in healthcare is by examining the perpetrators' motivations. Bauhr (2012) categorized corruption based on the motive of need versus greed. Need corruption (NC) is hallmarked by extortion and intimidation while collusion and shared advantages are the foundations of greed corruption (GC). Greed corruption is often hidden for long periods of time, while NC is frequently an open secret. The costs of GC are

distributed across people and organizations so individuals may not feel as directly impacted as by NC.

Both motivations for corruption are found in all nations, however, NC is more common in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) while GC prevails in high-income countries (HICs) (Bauhr, 2012). The United States, the geographic focus of this dissertation, is a HIC. Corruption manifests differently in HICs versus low- and middle-income countries LMICs. For example, fraudulent billing and embezzlement of funds are more common in HICs while counterfeit supplies, absenteeism, theft, and bribery are more prevalent in LMICs (Glynn, 2022). Governance is typically more robust in HICs. The community affected by GC may trust regulatory agencies to manage corruption and not engage directly in holding actors accountable. However, existing anti-corruption measures may not be enforced to their fullest extent. In fact, Coffee (2020) argued that the larger and more complex the corporate corruption is, the more likely it be settled or pled down instead of going to trial. Moreover, this pattern appears to be trending worse, with a 75% reduction in corporate prosecutions during the first Trump administration as compared to the immediately preceding Obama administration (Garrett, 2020).

The biomedical industry provides biotechnological, pharmaceutical, and diagnostic research, development, manufacturing, and distribution with the objective of improving healthcare (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 2022). The sector is highly complex, characterized by power inequalities, market uncertainties, and a mixture of public and private entities with varying motives (Mackey et al., 2016). These complexities make the biomedical field highly vulnerable to corruption. Moreover, corruption within this sector disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, especially women, children, disabled, and impoverished people (Al Qudah et al., 2025).

Transparency International (2016) created a new global program focused on decreasing corruption in the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors. The program focuses on corrupt practices and potential improvements within pharmaceutical research and development, manufacturing, registration, marketing, procurement, and distribution, as these areas are particularly susceptible to unethical activity. The program highlights a dearth of “data and understanding of corruption” (p. 28) as a key challenge in addressing biomedical corruption.

Enabling Factors of Corruption

Legal and societal expectations for ethical leadership have increased due to well-publicized scandals that have occurred since the turn of the century (Amory et al., 2024). Despite those changes, ethical leadership between 2004 and 2019 has remained stable globally and in the United States. Reports of ethical leadership have decreased in China, regarded as a prototypical Eastern society.

A toxic workplace comprises many factors, such as unethical culture, immoral management, unjust decision-making, and unhealthy inter-employee behavior (Botez & Cotet, 2021). DL is both a process and an outcome (Padilla et al., 2007). From a process perspective, scholars emphasize DL traits such as narcissism and Machiavellianism and behaviors such as coercion, alienation, and manipulation. When viewed from an outcome lens, the focus is on DL’s deleterious effects on followers and organizations.

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser described the toxic triangle theory in 2007. The premise of the theory is that there is “a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental factors that make destructive leadership possible” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 176). Based on the toxic triangle theory, there are three parts to a toxic organization: DL, SFs, and a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007). According to the theory, all three parts are necessary. A leader without followers is

not leading anyone; toxic leaders cannot influence SFs in a healthy environment; and a conducive environment will not turn toxic if the leaders and followers within the situation do not take it in that direction. These three elements are discussed herein as the enabling factors of corruption.

Destructive Leadership

DL does not have a single definition (Padilla et al., 2007). This type of leadership is regarded as a phenomenon that is seldom wholly destructive and involves a coercive, controlling, leader-centric orientation. According to the toxic triangle theory, DL is a process involving domination, intimidation, and manipulation that focuses on the needs or desires of the leaders rather than those of the group, resulting in negative consequences that detract from the organization's primary objectives. Krasikova et al. (2013) added that destructive leaders damage organizations by encouraging followers to engage in unethical actions. DL may also intentionally or accidentally harm followers and society at large (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Batchelor et al. (2023) added that DL comprises both acts of commission and omission.

Shaw et al. (2011) described four attributes of DL: (a) tyrannical behavior, such as arrogance, obstinance, and meanness; (b) laziness or incompetence; (c) high emotionality, including compulsivity and lack of self-control; and (d) carelessness or emotionally unintelligent interactions in the workplace. The toxic triangle theory describes DL using five components: "charisma, personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate" (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 180). Indeed, not all charismatic leaders are destructive, but charisma and DL have been empirically linked repeatedly. Destructive leaders use their power in unethical ways for personal gain. These leaders are narcissistic, that is, arrogant, dominant, entitled, self-absorbed, and often demand special privilege and unquestioning loyalty.

DL has been defined as a category of leadership that comprises authoritarian, abusive, narcissistic, and uncivil leadership behaviors (Cao et al., 2023). Additionally, Alexander et al. (2024) included DL's constructs: aversive, corrupt, derailed, despotic, evil, exploitative, insincere, insular, negative, personalized charismatic, pseudo-transformational, toxic, and tyrannical leadership. They also include leader bullying, exclusion, and undermining behaviors within DL.

Impacts of Destructive Leadership. The impacts of DL are overwhelmingly detrimental; Li et al. (2024) stated there is a “well-established conclusion that abusive supervision is deleterious” (p. 392). DL harms employees’ productivity and ability to find meaningfulness in their work (Grill, 2023). Moreover, this impact appears to grow over time. Snow et al. (2021) reported wide-ranging harmful implications to employee well-being under toxic leadership, such as depression, anxiety, weight gain, low confidence, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Shin and Hur (2020) attributed a long-term decrement in teachers’ job performance under an uncivil principal to low motivation and concerns about job security. Cao et al. (2023) found that DL amplifies aggression in the workplace, such as bullying, ostracism, undermining, and violence.

Toxic corporations are impacted negatively by various characteristics. Employees can engage in deviant behavior that targets their co-workers, such as gossiping, excluding, or bullying, or the organization, such as theft, sabotage, or destruction of property (Di Stefano et al., 2019). Employees of unethical businesses report decreased job satisfaction and engagement, increased stress-related time off, and a reluctance to share knowledge (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021). Employees become disillusioned, emotionally distressed, distrustful, and unproductive, which leads to team conflict and reduced commitment (Aumentado et al., 2024). These effects

result in reduced team effectiveness and increased employee turnover. Since employee engagement and organizational profitability are directly linked (Harter et al., 2002), the firm's bottom line is impacted by DL.

While most literature agrees that the results are overwhelmingly harmful (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021), not all consequences of DL are detrimental. In an extensive analysis of DL's influence on creativity and innovation, Mehraein et al. (2023) found positive correlations with narcissistic leadership. This improvement can be attributed, in part, to employees' increased information seeking and sharing amongst colleagues (Azam & Rizvi, 2021). Doğan and Aslan (2024) found a significant, direct relationship between employees' perception of toxic leadership and levels of organizational gossip. While gossip can be deleterious, this increase in informal communication may promote social cohesion amongst coworkers, providing resiliency in a challenging workplace. Despite some positive impacts of DL, researchers advise creating respectful, supportive workplaces that foster creativity and innovation (Mehraein et al., 2023) and long-term productivity (Liao et al., 2021).

Conducive Environments

Organizational culture is a complex combination of values, beliefs, and practices that shape how individuals interact, make decisions, and define their roles within an institution (Maulidi et al., 2024). Meza et al. (2024) described influences within a culture coming from all directions, including inside and outside an institution, along with top-down, bottom-up, and laterally. These influences include institutional and regulatory policies and laws, collegial and managerial pressure and attitudes, and social expectations and traditions that form cultural norms. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project has defined and documented relationships between leadership, societal culture, and organizational

culture since the 1990s (Hanges & Su, 2017). The GLOBE project defines nine dimensions of societal and organizational culture: uncertainty avoidance (UA), power distance (PD), institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism (GE), assertiveness, future orientation, performance orientation, and humane orientation.

The cultural dimensions of collectivism, UA, PD, and GE, and are known to impact levels of corruption in a region (Hohn et al., 2023). However, conflicting results have been found in the workplace. Within the United States, corporate social responsibility is negatively associated with local levels of corruption (Ucar & Staer, 2020). Pham et al. (2024) determined that financial advisors in the United States are more likely to commit fraud in environments with higher levels of local corruption. Societal cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance and more egalitarian power dynamics, such as Germany, tend to increase employees' perception of ethical leadership faster than societies with lower UA and less PD (Amory et al., 2024). Religiosity at an organizational level deters corrupt activities by acting as an ethical compass that guides decisions and behavior (Maulidi et al., 2024).

Padilla et al. (2007) described four elements contributing to environments where DL can thrive: "instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and the absence of checks and balances" (p. 185). Cultural values make certain people more vulnerable to the emergence of DL. For example, individuals in collectivist, risk-avoidant cultures with high power and wealth disparity are likelier to tolerate DL. SFs and DL cannot thrive in a healthy organizational culture that discourages authoritarian leadership, promotes ethical, fair, and just processes, and encourages whistleblowing (Thoroughgood et al., 2012).

Societal culture mediates the impacts of DL as well. For example, Cao and colleagues (2023) highlighted that PD mediates the effects of DL on followers. The increased task

performance sometimes seen under DL also varies across countries (Alexander et al., 2024). Liao and colleagues (2021) found an increase in task performance the day after experiencing abusive supervisor behavior and associated this with an increase in repetitive thought about the day before. This increase was only seen in a culture of low-PD culture such as the United States and was not seen in the high-PD culture of China. Improved task performance also only occurred when the worker considered the motivation for their boss's abusive behavior as a need for an increase in performance, not when the behavior was driven by malice or rudeness.

Susceptible Followers

Not everyone in an unhealthy organization is prone to the effects of destructive leaders. Some will leave, become whistleblowers, or fight back and can be non-compliant (Barbuto, 2000). According to the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007), those vulnerable to DL are known as SFs. Aumentado et al. (2024) found that employees who tolerated corrupt leadership did so because they either benefited from the corruption, feared retaliation, felt powerless, or were ambivalent. Padilla and colleagues (2007) defined two types of SFs based on their motivation: colluders and conformers. Colluders deliberately engage with their unethical leaders because they agree with their agenda or view. Colluders are ambitious and interested in their self-promotion. Based on a follower's motivations, recognition of power, level of resistance, and other characteristics, colluders can be regarded as acolytes or opportunists (Thoroughgood et al., 2012).

On the other hand, conformers fear their destructive leaders and comply with them to avoid the consequences of not doing so (Padilla et al., 2007). Conformers' vulnerability stems from psychological immaturity, unmet needs, low self-esteem, and an external locus of control. Thoroughgood et al. (2012) described conformers as authoritarians, lost souls, and bystanders.

Bublitz-Berg et al. (2024) expanded the understanding of SFs by categorizing their responses to toxic leadership as “suffering in silence” or “quiet yet concerned” (p. 1211). Individuals suffering in silence conformed with toxic leadership due to fear of their leadership. In contrast, those who refrained from confronting a toxic leader to protect their colleagues were considered quiet yet concerned.

Freud (as cited in Kernberg, 2020) described the changes that can occur within a large group of followers under DL. These shifts include (a) reduced individual judgment and rational thinking; (b) a sense of power based on mass, mutual identification with others; (c) identification with a powerful leader who is idolized or feared; (d) reliance on the leader to make decisions and release from that responsibility; and (e) release from the consequences of their actions and moral constraints. Volkan (2004, as cited in Kernberg, 2020) coined the phrase “large group regression” to describe these phenomena. Large group regression includes rallying around a destructive leader, thoughtlessly following their lead, and creating strong in- and out-groups to protect against perceived threats. According to Padilla and colleagues (2007), followers may forego established governance and afford leaders more autonomy and authority to stabilize the situation and quell imminent threats. Note that threats do not have to be real or likely; they only need to be perceived to be exploited. Centralized power without appropriate checks and balances can lead to absolute power and DL. The centralization of power can accelerate when followers are SFs.

The characteristics of toxic leaders have been studied intensely, but the features of followers are less researched (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). There are many gaps in the literature about the mediators of toxic leadership from the follower’s perspective. These gaps include the ethical climate (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021), perceived support and trust (Jiang et

al., 2017), employee motivations (Di Stefano et al., 2019), cognitive dissonance (Noghani, 2021), ethnic background (Tufan et al., 2023), identification with the organization (Qi et al., 2020) or agreement with the leadership style (Thau et al., 2009). Destructive leaders target SFs predominantly based on their performance instead of their personalities (Mackey, 2021). However, once a relationship is established, the follower plays an essential role in maintaining and growing the toxic leader's impact.

Unsusceptible Followers. Not all employees in an unhealthy organization are SFs. "Unsusceptible followers" can confront unethical activities by engaging in prosocial acts such as cooperative communications to educate and persuade colleagues into collaboration for change (Bublitz-Berg et al., 2024). Confronters can also blow the whistle to internal or external regulatory bodies. As this study aims to analyze unethical employee behavior, it is vital to understand ethical follower behavior. Understanding those who decide to report wrongdoing adds perspective to more deeply understand employees who comply or collude.

The United States has two particularly powerful anti-corruption statutes that rely on whistleblowers. In 2001, thousands of Americans lost their retirement savings, and dozens of banks, utilities, investment firms, and industry- or government-related pensions were heavily damaged or destroyed by Enron's fraudulent accounting and conflicts of interest (Sridharan et al., 2002). The devastation cost its shareholders almost \$11 billion. In response to the Enron scandal, the U.S. Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) Act of 2002, which mandates specific reporting, compliance officers, and whistleblower protection (Sarbanes & Oxley, 2002). The False Claims Act (FCA) is another potent tool for combating fraud, especially against federal programs (Stehlin, 2023). Enacted in 1863, the FCA allows the U.S. government to recover damages and penalties from individuals or entities that submit fraudulent claims, commit

bribery, participate in kickbacks, rig procurement processes, or otherwise misuse federal funds. Whistleblower protections and incentives were added to the FCA in 1986 and 2009, respectively.

In the face of ethical dilemmas, whistleblowers play a critical role. The Dodd-Frank Whistleblower Provision significantly reduced “abnormal accruals” by 11% by reducing the incentives of misconduct (Buccirossi et al., 2021). Since whistleblower protections started, judgments and settlements total more than \$85 billion (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). As shown in Table 1, from 2021–2025, whistleblower contributions accounted for 77%–86% of total FCA recoveries and 70%–76% of total FCA cases each year (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021b, 2022a, 2023, 2024a, 2025, 2026).

Table 1

Judgments and Settlements Recovered Through the False Claims Act From 2021–2025 in Total and Attributable to Whistleblowers

Fiscal Year	Total FCA Recoveries	Whistleblower Recoveries	% of FCA Recoveries from Whistleblowers	Total FCA Cases	Whistleblower Cases	% of FCA Cases from Whistleblowers
2021	\$5.6 billion	\$4.3 billion	76.8%	801	598	74.7%
2022	\$2.2 billion	\$1.9 billion	86.4%	890	652	73.3%
2023	\$2.7 billion	\$2.3 billion	85.2%	1,150	850	73.9%
2024	\$2.9 billion	\$2.4 billion	82.8%	1,402	979	69.8%
2025	\$6.8 billion	\$5.3 billion	77.9%	1,698	1,297	76.4%

The widely accepted definition of whistleblowing (WB) is “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Four decisions comprise the WB process. First, an observer must determine if an event or behavior is unethical or unlawful. Second, an observer must choose to report the activity. Next, the recipient of the allegation must decide how they will respond. Finally, the

consequences are exacted upon the whistleblower and the target of the investigation. Each of these events is a crucial part of the WB process. However, for this study, the focus is on the observer who decides to divulge the information also known as “blowing the whistle”.

Whistleblowing is an interventional act of moral courage that involves three types of reasoning: individual, collaborative, and collective (Wiisak et al., 2023). A whistleblower exercises individual reasoning by trusting their judgment and taking responsibility to advocate for a person or organization in unethical or illegal circumstances. Whistleblowers using collaborative reasoning seek the counsel of others while supporting others and taking shared responsibility for the benefit of others or an organization. Whistleblowers who make judgments based on group cohesiveness, norms, or rules and act for the greater good base their actions on collective reasoning.

Individuals attempt to make sense of complex or ambiguous situations through metacognitive rationalization (Mumford et al., 2008). Seven reasoning strategies are used: recognizing circumstances, getting outside help, questioning judgment, dealing with emotions, predicting consequences, evaluating personal motivations, and considering others’ perspectives. During this sensemaking process, witnesses of wrongdoing undergo significant stress as they reconcile fear of the potential negative consequences with their moral compass (MacLennan, 2024). This process of distress and ethical reconciliation is known as moral injury. McIntosh et al. (2019) found that individuals with higher levels of moral intensity spent less time thinking before WB. The study also found that non-reporters spend more cognitive and emotional energy considering options before ultimately deciding not to blow the whistle, implying that emotions play a role in the decision. However, the opposite has been found as well. Latan et al. (2021)

found that the more time a whistleblower spends in the rationalization process, the less fear and anxiety the whistleblower feels.

Whistleblowing often comes at a significant personal and professional cost (MacLennan, 2024). Whistleblowers frequently experience psychological, emotional, social, and financial harm. Latan et al. (2021) reported that the greater the potential repercussions of whistleblowing for the whistleblower, the lower the likelihood of whistleblowing. Therefore, whistleblower protection is critical because considering the consequences is part of the WB process. Lack of protection from retribution and diffusion of responsibility are common reasons witnesses of wrongdoing decide not to whistleblow (Lundsford et al., 2022). In the United States, Europe, and Australia, whistleblowers in the healthcare sector undergo enormous ethical stress and hesitation before WB (Ekpenyong et al., 2021). Despite relatively strong whistleblower protections, these Western healthcare providers consistently reported fearing retaliation from their organizations and colleagues.

Similar to the factors that converge to permit unethical activities, organizational culture and individual characteristics unite to support WB. According to Curtis and Taylor (2009), WB activity is encouraged when employees' values align with the organization's. The employees trust the organization to take appropriate actions in response to a report of wrongdoing. Whistleblowers carefully consider the level of the entity that will deal with the consequences of the WB. When an individual is impacted, as opposed to a corporation, the whistleblower spends more metacognitive effort before WB (McIntosh et al., 2019). Being directly affected by misconduct is also a strong motivator for WB (Schmolke & Utikal, 2025).

Several factors affect whether witnesses of wrongdoing become whistleblowers. The hierarchical position of the witness compared to the perpetrator is one aspect. The stress related

to WB is greater when the perpetrator of misconduct is a superior rather than a peer (McIntosh et al., 2019). Participants were nearly twice as likely to report a peer's unethical activity rather than an advisor's because they believe there is less risk of negative consequences. Moreover, before deciding to blow the whistle on a superior, whistleblowers spent more metacognitive effort and consulted others.

Another motivator of WB is the apparent seriousness of the unethical act (Latan et al., 2021). The higher the perceived seriousness, the more likely WB becomes present in the workplace. In a metadata analysis of over 217 articles from 1984 to 2020, Nicholls et al. (2021) reported that more proactive, honest, and risk-averse employees are likelier to become whistleblowers. Likewise, workers who strongly value their personal ethics and seek to benefit others are more likely to report unethical conduct. Employees who report feelings of hopelessness and those with Machiavellian personalities are also less likely to become whistleblowers. Lee-Kugler et al. (2025) found that more empathetic employees felt greater moral anger and were likelier to report unethical leadership behavior. Ethical decision making and moral courage in the workplace are reinforced by autonomous regulation (Arroyo et al., 2024). This aligns with Curtis and Taylor's (2009) finding that individuals with an internal locus of control are more likely to whistleblow.

Schmolke and Utikal (2025) found that various determinants within a corporation affect the propensity of WB. For example, penalizing participants monetarily who fail to report misconduct is a strong motivator. Simply requiring WB by policy is an incentive, as is rewarding WB. This aligns with Arroyo and colleagues' (2024) finding that externally motivated employees also blow the whistle when it is seen as required by organizational policy.

Whistleblowing is also increased when the reporter is confident that the organization will take action (McIntosh et al., 2019).

Unethical Follower Behavior

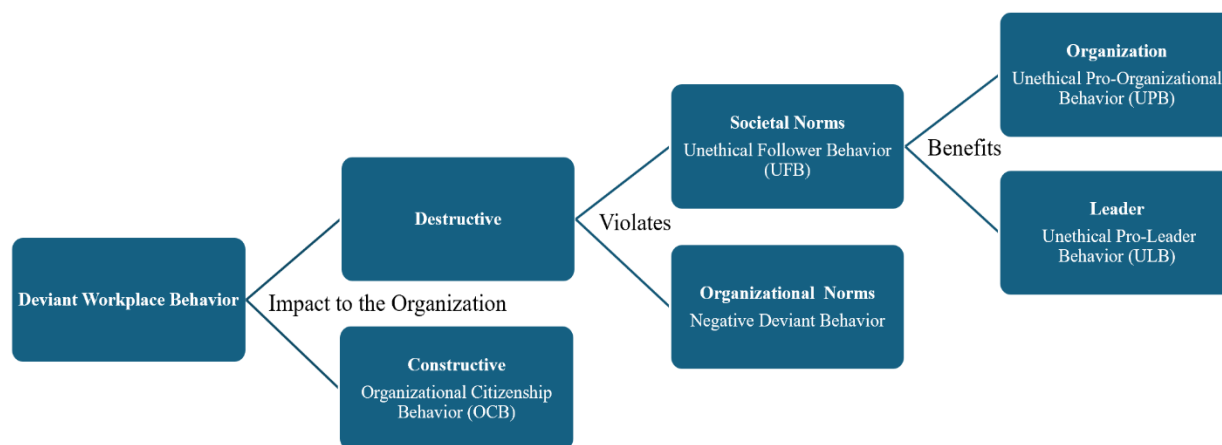
The phrase deviant workplace behavior was coined by Robinson and Bennett (1995) as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (p. 556). As illustrated in Figure 4, deviant workplace behavior can be characterized as constructive or destructive depending on the positive or negative impact on the organization, respectively (Jain & Dhingra, 2023). Employees can voluntarily engage in negative, destructive workplace deviant behaviors that violate organizational expectations and target their co-workers (behaviors such as gossiping, excluding, or bullying) or the organization itself (characteristics such as theft, sabotage, or destruction of property) (Di Stefano et al., 2019). Destructive deviant behavior that violates societal norms is known as unethical follower behavior (UFB). Unethical follower behavior, which is the focus of the current study, can be further categorized by who the activity helps most. Pro-organizational UFB predominantly benefits the organization (Umphress et al., 2010), while pro-leader UFB primarily aids the leader (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019).

The adverse effects of UFB are at least threefold. First, the employees themselves are negatively affected. Employees experiencing co-workers’ UFB have been shown to experience cognitive dissonance (Yang et al., 2022), decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, and long-term physical distress (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Ogunfowora et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Next, these employees negatively impact their organization through decreased organizational citizenship behavior, productivity, and knowledge sharing with increased turnover and stress-

related time off (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021). Finally, complicit followers play a vital role in corruption by actively executing or not reporting an overall scheme (Tourish & Willmott, 2023).

Figure 4

Categorization of Destructive Deviant Workplace Behavior



Note. Deviant workplace behavior (DWB) can be constructive or destructive based on its impact to the organization. Destructive DWB can be further categorized by the norms it violates and who it benefits.

Unethical follower behavior has been consistently found by complicit followers in highly detrimental organizations (Mowchan et al., 2015) such as Enron, WorldCom, Lehman Brothers, Volkswagen, Madoff Securities, Facebook, and Kobe Steel. Whether by passivity or active collusion, unethical follower cooperation can result in large-scale organizational corruption (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). At Volkswagen, employees described a culture of unrealistic goals and intimidation for not meeting those goals (Rothfeder, 2016). While some workers left the organization, at least 14 employees at varying levels of authority were criminally charged for engineering and installing devices that deceived vehicle emissions tests. These colluding

employees violated the public trust and environmental standards to protect their jobs (Tabuchi et al., 2017).

Similarly, the Theranos biotech company claimed to have created life-changing medical testing technology, which was ultimately found to be fraudulent (Griffin, 2022). Employee dissent was suppressed. Surveillance, separation, and threats enforced secrecy among employees. Turnover was high in the company, with employees calling it “constant” (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 29) and “like nothing [they had] ever experienced” (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 51). Those who remained at the corporation exalted their CEO, and the company’s idealist mission (Tourish & Willmott, 2023). The company created a culture of a unique identity with followers even performing conformist rituals like group chanting (Carreyrou, 2022). Ultimately, only two employees blew the whistle to elucidate the scam. These are just a few examples of cooperative followers participating in egregious corruption.

Antecedents of Unethical Follower Behavior

Researchers most commonly adopt cognitive theories to investigate ethical behavior and have found that affect and cognition are the two essential components that influence ethical (and unethical) behavior in the workplace (He et al., 2023). Despite this, the interplay of morality, thought processes, and emotion is still poorly understood. Understanding the details of ethical decision-making will help curtail unethical behavior (Wimbush, 1999). The current study examined follower behavior from social, cognitive, and moral perspectives which are discussed below.

Social Lens. Work supervisors are consistently rated as most influential in determining ethical behavior, above family, peers, and societal norms (Wimbush, 1999). Graen and Schiemann (1978) described the vertical dyad linkage model, noting that leaders form

heterogeneous, individualized relationships with their subordinates. Graen and Schiemann later refined that theory into leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which focuses on the quality of leader-follower relationships that build loyalty and how they affect organizational outcomes (Bass & Bass, 2009). Somers (2022) used FT to explore the reciprocal relationship between federal employees and their leadership in relation to employee development and taking initiative. In doing so, they co-create a positive work environment. Somers surmised that reciprocal influence between followers and leaders, as posited by LMX, is crucial for leadership and organizational success.

Nguyen et al. (2021) cited reciprocity to explain positive and negative employee behavior to maintain strong LMX. Highlighting a potentially detrimental impact of high LMX, employees reporting strong LMX were more likely to engage in UPB if their leader modeled the activity. Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) defined leader immorality encouragement (LIE) as the employee's understanding that their leadership encourages unethical behaviors that benefit the organization (UPB). The authors found a positive relationship between employee willingness to commit UPB and their perception of LMX strength.

Social cognitive theory posits that individuals learn by observing others and the consequences of their behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Followers learn to behave morally or immorally from leaders in social situations (Moore et al., 2019). Lee (2023) determined that employees who identify strongly with their leaders are likely to perform unethical acts to benefit the leader. Similarly, employees who identify more with their supervisors are likelier to engage in UPB (Luan et al., 2023). Moreover, Ishaq et al. (2023) found that employees who identify more strongly with their leaders than with their organizations are more likely to exhibit unethical behavior that hurts the organization.

Cavazotte et al. (2021) found clear interactions between the emotional display of leaders, followers' identification with those leaders, and their leaders' ethicality. For example, the researchers found that followers identify more strongly with leaders who advocate for unethical behaviors while expressing positive emotions than with leaders who express anger or sadness. Followers also judged angry leaders to be less ethical than despondent leaders. Other situations also promote UFB, such as unrealistic performance goals, wanting a voice in decisions, conflicts of interest, and unclear expectations (Feldman, 2019). A leadership bottom-line mentality can also promote UFB (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019; Mishra et al., 2022).

Cognitive Lens. Self-concept is a multi-dimensional construct reflecting how someone sees their psychological and physical traits, abilities, and tendencies (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Self-concept is largely subconscious and drives decision-making, actions, and mood. The self-concept is dynamic and based on context, so that at any time, various aspects of one's self-concept may be dominant or "working" (Lord, 2008, p. 260). A follower's working self-concept is partly created through their relationship with leaders and group memberships. Self-esteem is the subjective opinion someone has about their overall value (Erez & Woolum, 2017) and is closely related to self-concept (Chen et al., 2022).

Mercadante et al. (2023) found that followers with low self-esteem rated dominant leaders more effective than followers with high self-esteem. This indicates that low self-esteem may increase susceptibility to destructive leaders. Zeng et al. (2023) reported that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between followers' identities and followership behaviors, leading to positive or negative organizational outcomes.

According to Kohlberg (1971), individuals make ethical decisions based on their stage of moral development that aligns with cognitive growth throughout childhood, adolescence, and

adulthood. Kohlberg's cognitive moral development (CMD) theory contains three stages (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional), each subdivided into two parts. According to the CMD theory, in addition to maturing cognitive skills, social interaction is crucial to developing morality. Kohlberg's theory has several weaknesses when explaining ethical decision-making. For example, individuals typically progress through stages in one direction, without reverting, but not everyone achieves every level (Kohlberg, 1971). Kohlberg's theory also does not account for the differences between people in the same stage (Sanders et al., 2018) or the variance seen in the ethical decisions made by an individual in various situations (Hannah et al., 2018).

Kohlberg's CMD theory also restricts the stages to universal standards, thereby removing ethical relativism (DeTienne et al., 2021). Ethical relativism is the propensity to make ethical decisions based on the current situation rather than based on universal moral standards. There has been an ongoing suggestion that relativists are more likely to engage in unethical behavior than idealists (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). However, Nguyen et al. (2021) demonstrated no base difference in propensity for immoral activities. Furthermore, the authors found that once idealists had morally disengaged, they were more willing to conduct UPB than relativists.

Rest (1994) expanded Kohlberg's CMD theory and defined four components necessary for ethical decision making: moral sensitivity (recognition), moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Rest's four-component theory emphasized a person's ability to recognize that a situation contains a moral issue. This requires empathy, perspective-taking, and awareness of how actions affect others. Once a moral issue is identified, an individual must draw on moral principles to determine the most ethical choice. A person must then be motivated to prioritize the

most moral action, despite possible consequences or competing interests. Finally, an ethical decision requires the fortitude to act, which may require courage, resilience, and integrity.

Scholars have applied Kohlberg and Rest's theories to business research for decades. For example, Greenberg (2002) found interactions between employees' level of CMD, the presence of a corporate ethics policy, and the propensity to steal money. Trevino and Youngblood (1990) found that employees with the highest levels of CMD and internal locus of control were the most likely to choose ethically when presented with a moral dilemma in the workplace. Chung and Hsu (2017) found a linear and direct relationship between the accuracy of managerial reports and CMD levels, despite the loss of monetary reward. Ho (2025) found that CMD interacts with a leader's UPB such that workers with high levels of CMD are less affected by leaders' unethical activities. Still, employees with lower CMD are significantly more likely to engage in UPB when their bosses engage in these practices. In 1957, Festinger defined cognitive dissonance as the psychological discomfort people feel when they hold conflicting beliefs or their actions contradict their values (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Festinger contended that individuals are driven to resolve the state of dissonance. Noghani (2021) demonstrated that the clarity of a follower's self-concept impacts their vulnerability to DL, especially through manipulating the followers' cognitive dissonance.

Morality Lens. Moral dissonance is a type of cognitive dissonance that occurs when actions or decisions conflict with a person's ethical values (Burton & Vu, 2021). Moral disengagement is a mental technique that overrides a person's self-regulatory methods of preventing unethical actions (Bandura, 1999). Bandura described eight mechanisms by which individuals can morally disengage to maintain their self-concept while participating in unethical activity. These mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous

comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame (Bandura et al., 1996).

Moral disengagement is associated with high levels of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Luan et al., 2023). Lian et al. (2022) argued that employees learn moral disengagement by observing leaders engage in UPB. When leaders model moral disengagement, according to social learning theory, followers may mimic the behavior or assume the reasoning behind the actions and produce their unethical behavior. Employee moral disengagement reduced the willingness of employees to go along with leaders' UPB (Nguyen et al., 2021). However, willingness was increased by higher levels of LMX. These findings correspond with Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) that LMX, moral disengagement, and anticipation of rewards all contribute to understanding an employee's UFB.

Mawritz et al. (2023) examined the interplay of leaders' trait anger and moral disengagement, in the context of varying follower self-esteem levels and fluctuating job stress. They found that leaders with high moral justification more easily targeted followers with low self-esteem. Moreover, followers with low self-esteem reported more abuse from bosses with high moral justification regardless of the level of job stress. Mawritz and colleagues' findings are another example of the interaction among the leader, the follower, and their environment.

Moral identity is a trait that describes the extent to which behavior and decisions are driven by morality (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). When morality is a central an individual's self-concept, they are said to have a strong moral identity. Moral identity theory posits that moral identity is the foundational motivator of ethical decision making (DeTienne et al., 2021). Employees with a heightened moral identity are less likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Luan et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2022). An inverse relationship

exists between moral identity and moral disengagement (Moore et al., 2019). Employees with a high moral identity who engage in UFB experience cognitive dissonance and often leave the organization to relieve the uncomfortable state (Noghani, 2021). Employees with a lower sense of morality continue the UFB, and a spiral of unethical conduct can propagate. Whether through employee attrition or direct unethical activity, UFB promotes deleterious effects on the organization.

Self-control is a psychological process that allows people to resist activities motivated by short-term, selfish goals and, instead, behave in a manner consistent with their identity, values, and long-term aims (Gino et al., 2011). Dishonesty increases under time pressure and exhaustion because self-control is finite. The exhaustion of self-control is known as moral fatigue. Moreover, ethical behavior expends much more cognitive energy than unethical behavior. Recall Rest's four-component model of ethical decision making. When fatigued, the process of moral awareness can be impacted. Timmons and Byrne (2019) found that moral fatigue impedes the ability to connect actions with outcomes, but high levels of moral identity protect against the effects of moral fatigue. (Mishra et al., 2022) reported that mindfulness practice mediates UPB, demonstrating that slowing decision-making results in more ethical choices.

The moral judgment-action gap is the discrepancy between an individual's ethical judgment and their behavior (DeTienne et al., 2021). Business ethics scholars join the social, cognitive, and moral perspectives to understand the disparity between an employee's convictions and their actions. Researchers have established that cognitive moral development and supervisor influence mediate subordinates' ethical behavior (Ho, 2025; L. K. Trevino, 1986; Wimbush, 1999).

Cognitive theories such as Kohlberg's CMD do not fully explain the judgment-action gap because Kohlberg's theory provides a method to understand thinking, not behavior (L. K. Trevino, 1986). Virtue ethics scholars believe ethical decision-making is personal and situation-based (Grant et al., 2018). Moral identity theorists focus on behavioral habits that align with individual characteristics. For example, the self model (Blasi, 1983) comprises three factors: moral identity, personal responsibility, and self-consistency. According to DeTienne et al. (2021), the self model offers a viable mediator between moral reasoning and behavior to potentially close the judgment-action gap. The literature encourages ethics education and reinforcement as methods of mitigating toxic organizations. However, despite this training, some people will unquestioningly follow unethical leaders (Perun, 2020). This may be an attempt to reduce cognitive or moral dissonance. For example, despite robust factual evidence, followers have been shown to double down on supporting someone who has committed an extreme ethical violation (Bowman, 2018; Karg et al., 2022).

Summary

Chapter two began by describing the theoretical framework of phenomenology combined with DAMILEF. The framework of DAMILEF explains leadership and followership as mutually reinforcing processes rooted in shared social identity. This dynamic can foster resilience and cohesion, but also carries ethical risks when overidentification with leaders leads to unethical compliance.

A brief historical review of followership was provided before considering the widespread issue of corporate corruption and its consequences, focusing on the biomedical industry. The three enabling factors of corporate corruption were examined: DL, conducive environments, and SFs. Four models of follower typology were discussed based on various spectra, such as

dominance and passivity, critical thinking, levels of leadership support, or engagement. As unsusceptible followers, whistleblowers were examined according to their reasoning strategies and ethical reconciliation. Understanding those who decide to report wrongdoing adds perspective to more deeply understand employees who comply or collude.

The antecedents of unethical follower behavior were described through the social, cognitive, and moral perspectives. Aspects of leader-follower relationships, such as reciprocity, loyalty, behavior, and co-creation of outcomes, were discussed through LMX and social cognitive theories. Self-concept, cognitive moral development, as well as moral identity, dissonance, and disengagement, were discussed in relation to ethical decision making and the moral-judgment gap.

Transparency International (2016) highlighted the scarcity of data as a key problem in understanding and addressing corruption in the biomedical industry. Scholars have made calls for additional research to understand the mediators of toxic leadership from a follower's perspective. These requests include the ethical climate (Guedes Almeida et al., 2021), perceived support and trust (Jiang et al., 2017), employee motivations (Di Stefano et al., 2019), cognitive dissonance (Noghani, 2021), and identification with the organization (Qi et al., 2020) which were discussed in this review.

The reviewed literature indicated a critical need to explore how employees in the biomedical industry experience and interpret their roles in ethically compromised environments, especially from a followership perspective grounded in shared identity and moral reasoning. The literature revealed a gap in understanding how followers experience and rationalize unethical compliance with corrupt leaders, especially in the biomedical field. This underscored the need

for a research design that can capture the depth of these lived experiences. Chapter 3 presents the methodology that guided this investigation.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Toxic workplace environments pose global societal risks, particularly within the biomedical sector. The prevalence and severity of corruption within organizations are closely linked to employee complicity and institutional tolerance for unethical conduct. Toxic corporations can negatively affect society worldwide (Bai et al., 2024; Prechel, 2022). Corporate corruption harms communities through damage to the environment (Demeshko et al., 2024), political and economic development (Bai et al., 2024), and democratic practices (Bakir, 2020). Corporate corruption erodes societal trust in government regulation (Dorfleitner et al., 2022), consumer safety (Al-Zogbi et al., 2019), and financial security (Prechel, 2022). Biomedical corporations that participate in unethical activities threaten public health and safety, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations (Glynn, 2022) billions of dollars in fines and lawsuit settlements (Garrett, 2014). While leaders often take the blame after corporate scandals, organizations do not become toxic through leadership alone (Almeida et al., 2021; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Page & Mgwenya, 2023). Large-scale corruption is only possible with cooperative employees' help and participation (Tourish & Willmott, 2023).

The problem addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. Not everyone in an unhealthy organization is prone to the effects of destructive leaders; some employees will voluntarily leave (Li et al., 2024), become whistleblowers (Oelrich & Chwolka, 2024), or convert to noncompliance (Bandura, 1999). Cooperative followers must be studied to elucidate the employee's lived experience and decision-making during corrupt activities. A focus of research on DL (Johnson et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2019; Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023)

and, to a lesser extent, organizational culture (Di Stefano et al., 2019) has resulted in a comparative disparity of theoretical and practical knowledge surrounding followership.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. The role of an employee's social identification with a leader is understood to be crucial in engaged followership (EF) (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019). Examining these susceptible followers (SFs) from the colluder and conformer lens provided valuable insight into their role in corrupt organizations. This insight increased the understanding of followers' emotional state, thinking, and, ultimately, their behavior in unethical situations. An increased knowledge of followers' complex roles in toxic organizations is necessary to prevent corruption.

This chapter begins with a narrative of the research methodology and design that was used and the justification of its suitability for this dissertation research. The review continues with a discussion of the population and sample, including the method of sampling and recruitment, materials, study procedures, data collection, and analysis. This chapter then explains the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances of the study.

Research Methodology and Design

A qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted for this dissertation. This enabled me to explore the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership. Moreover, this method and design allowed investigation of cooperative followers within corrupt biomedical corporations.

Rationale for the Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research allows investigators to explore complex data in a deep manner (Yin, 2015) while examining the interplay of constructs that make up reality (Bloomberg, 2023). While quantitative studies attempt to control many confounding variables, qualitative research embraces the complexity of the interplay of constructs that make up reality. Since the late 1800s, investigators of behavior and culture phenomena have acknowledged that quantitative methods could not appropriately capture the nuance they desired (Agius, 2013). Anthropologists were fundamental in advancing qualitative methods such as field observation, journaling, and artifact analysis to understand the complexities of humankind. Researchers now recognize that qualitative tools, such as semi-structured, individual, and focus group interviewing; discussion; consensus building; and textual and visual media analysis, are superior to quantitative tactics for investigating multifaceted phenomena. Qualitative methods allow researchers to gather information in natural settings, promoting data quality (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, investigators can maintain a holistic approach to understanding experience instead of employing the reductive view needed to fit quantitative variables.

The research aimed to increase understanding of the behavior, thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of employees who cooperate with corrupt leaders. Qualitative research concentrates on such intricacies and complexity (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019). Quantitative tools such as surveys would not provide the information required to understand the lived experiences of these employees. I used open-ended, semi-structured interviews to gather information about these experiences. This method allowed me to investigate actual incidents of cooperation within a toxic organization, as opposed to a contrived scenario.

Rationale for the Phenomenological Design

A phenomenological study design allowed the exploration of employees' lived experiences, including their social identification and cooperation with corrupt leaders, during their tenure within a corrupt biomedical corporation. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design used to understand and describe the lived experiences of individuals (Londen et al., 2023). Understanding the behavior, thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of employees who are complicit with corrupt leaders is undoubtedly complex, and phenomenological research concentrates on research questions that ask *how* rather than *what* that can investigate such intricacies (Smith et al., 2022). There are three primary phenomenology approaches: Husserl's transcendental, Heidegger's hermeneutical, and Smith's interpretive analysis (Miller et al., 2018).

All three phenomenology approaches focus on elucidating a person's lived experience from their perspective, which is crucial for this dissertation. However, the techniques used in these designs vary. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is descriptive (Qutoshi, 2018) and seeks to understand the essence of the lived experience and its existential commonality at the human consciousness level (Bloomberg, 2023). Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology aims to interpret the lived experience and derive meaning from it (Farrell, 2020). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) uses "a double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith, 2011, p. 10).

IPA, in particular, aligns well with the goal of the current research: to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. There are three foundations of IPA (Smith, 2011)

that facilitated this investigation. First, IPA is rooted in traditional phenomenology and focuses on the lived experience from the participant's perspective. Second, the lived experience must be analyzed and interpreted in the hermeneutic tradition. Finally, IPA is idiographic, focusing on each participant or case. High-quality IPA studies combine divergence and convergence (Smith et al., 2022). In other words, it must retain the uniqueness of each case while synthesizing patterns across them. IPA supports the ontological construct that multiple realities are possible when viewed through the lens of the participant (Harrison, 2023).

Hermeneutics was also used, given the philosophical foundation of IPA. Hermeneutics originated as a method of making meaning from ancient written text (Heidegger, 1962). Hermeneutics has expanded dramatically and can be applied to many forms of written material (Lavery, 2003). Therefore, this method was applied to publicly available court and interview transcripts of former employees of corrupt biomedical corporations to support the study's trustworthiness through triangulation.

Consideration of Alternative Research Designs

Several other qualitative research designs were considered for this dissertation. The case study provides a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the case being considered, capturing the complexity and uniqueness of the phenomenon within a specific context (Creswell, 2007). Case studies offer insights into the interactions between what is occurring in the case and its context. Case studies provide detailed and contextualized insights into specific instances. However, the case study design is highly contextual and may not be transferable at all beyond the observed context (Bloomberg, 2023). Yin (2015) described eight decisions that strengthen the results of qualitative research. Two of these are particularly important for choosing an IPA design instead of a case study: limited transferability and restricted integration of theory.

The ethnographic design aims to study phenomena within cultures and communities through immersion and observation (Griffin & Bengy-Howell, 2008). Ethnography offers a comprehensive understanding of cultural practices and social interactions and is valuable for exploring group behaviors and societal norms. The ethnographer must be immersed in the culture or the situation to observe the culture in its natural environment. However, embedding into a corrupt biomedical corporation would not be feasible. While case studies could be done covertly, covert ethnography within a corporation would be unethical and likely illegal.

The motivation for grounded theory designs is to generate theory grounded in participant data (Schroth, 2022). Grounded theory helps develop new theories or modify or enhance extant frameworks. Grounded theory provides a systematic approach to understanding processes, actions, and interactions within a specific context. For the results of grounded theory research to be most valid, data are gradually obtained through repetition. Grounded theory studies are time-consuming because repeated measures are required to narrow and confirm data findings. These processes often take years and may never be fully complete. In addition to the lengthy process, the objective of this dissertation is not to generate wholly new theory. For these reasons, the grounded theory design was excluded from consideration.

Finally, the narrative research design focuses on exploring an individual's life through their stories (Squire et al., 2014). This design provides deep insights into personal experiences and the meaning individuals attach to them. Since narrative research is focused on storytelling, this design helps understand an individual's perspective within the context of their experiences. However, this output does not align with the goals of this dissertation.

Population and Sample

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023 approximately 1,522,610 people worked in the biomedical industry. The biomedical industry is defined as the industry that provides biotechnological, pharmaceutical, and diagnostic research, development, manufacturing, and distribution to improve healthcare (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with former employees of a biomedical corporation recognized for corrupt practices (Appendix B).

Criterion sampling is the strategy used in phenomenological research (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Participants were selected by meeting specific pre-determined criteria surrounding a lived experience. In this case, individuals were chosen based on their experiences as former employees of a biomedical corporation who have directly observed or participated in unethical corporate behavior. This population was appropriate since these employees can provide unique perspectives which are needed to understand their experiences and how those experiences are influenced by social identification with their leadership. Snowball sampling was also attempted. The participants all identified as male and varied in demographic attributes such as age and level of education and gender. However, the shared lived experience is the most crucial criterion.

I sought to interview three to 10 participants based on the recommendations for IPA sample sizes of Smith et al. (2022). Saturation occurs when only redundant data is uncovered from additional participants, and no new substantive information about the phenomenon is gained (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In an interview with Zahavi (Zahavi, 2016), van Manen stated that data saturation is impossible within phenomenological research. However, I achieved

functional data saturation with five participants, as no substantive codes were added after the fourth participant. Ultimately, seven former employees were interviewed.

Participants were recruited for participation via LinkedIn, an online professional networking platform. Approximately 800 individuals on LinkedIn self-identify as former employees of a biomedical company well-known for corrupt and criminal activities. I contacted potential participants with active accounts with a brief description of the study and requested response to me if they meet the inclusion criteria (Sikkens et al., 2017). The inclusion criteria were (a) an adult who was employed for at least 3 months in the United States for a biomedical company, (b) doubted the public claims of the company during their employment, (c) participated in activities that supported fraudulent claims, and/or (d) recognized unethical activities of their colleagues.

Employees of well-publicized incidents of corruption have participated in previous interviews and legal proceedings. I obtained publicly available employee interviews and court testimony as secondary data sources to promote triangulation (Bloomberg, 2023). Background and supporting data were also collected from documentation available via the websites of the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, including press releases and administrative proceedings.

Instrumentation

The semi-structured interview was the primary method of data collection in IPA (Smith et al., 2022). This interview format ensured that questions are consistent across participants yet allowed a conversational tone and probing into topics as they arose from the interviewee (Naz et al., 2022). According to the subject's preference, the interviews were conducted over the telephone or via video teleconference (Heath et al., 2018). Participants were asked semi-

structured, open-ended questions about their relationships with managers and corporate leaders as well as their actions and perceptions of unethical activity within their workplace (Appendix B). Questions were adapted from measures created by Walumbwa and Hartnell (2011) and Steffens et al. (2014). The interview protocol was developed iteratively with the assistance of dissertation committee members (Naz et al., 2022). Then, the interview was field tested with a co-worker to assess the questions' timing, comprehensiveness, and clarity and to ensure a conversational tone.

The interview questions allowed the study of the following constructs: relational identification with a leader, collective identity, ideological emphasis, value alignment with a leader and group, and willingness to adapt behavior, which aligned with the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of employees within the United States who support unethical activities in biomedical corporations?

RQ2: How do the lived experiences of employees in the United States reflect the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations?

I used publicly available employee interviews and court testimony to assist with triangulation. Background and supporting data were also collected from press releases, settlements, and other documentation available via the websites of the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. These extant data sources promoted triangulation (Bloomberg, 2023).

Study Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method the study (Appendix B). I conducted the interviews over the telephone or via video teleconference, depending on the participant's preference (Heath et al., 2018). I took notes during the interview to ask follow-up questions and enhance the later analysis of the interview. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Data were collected and tagged for interview analysis (Silver & Lewins, 2014) using NVivo software (Lumivero, 2024). After the analysis, member checking also occurred so that the participants could verify the findings associated with their interviews.

Data collected from witness testimony from publicly available court proceedings related to corruption experience at the firm promoted triangulation. Testimony is recognized as a rich data source since court witnesses have experienced the incident they are describing and engage in processes to make sense of that event (van der Heiden, 2021). Publicly available interviews were also transcribed as another source of data. The court testimony and interview transcripts underwent line-by-line data collection, which is considered the gold standard for subsequent qualitative analysis (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Data were collected and tagged for analysis (Silver & Lewins, 2014) from the court and public interview transcripts using NVivo software (Lumivero, 2024).

Court transcription contains exact verbiage but does not capture non-verbal cues or periods of silence, which are important in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007). However, applying hermeneutics to purely written material is widely accepted (Laverly, 2003). Background and supporting data were also collected from documentation available via the websites of the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

These websites provided historical case information through press releases, adjudications, and settlement information.

Data Analysis

Analysis of IPA-derived data was divided into two phases: the description of the experience from the participant's perspective and the speculative interpretation of the sense-making the participant underwent (Miller et al., 2018). Although IPA analysis does not require a prescriptive approach, the following six stages were typical for my analysis (Smith et al., 2022). These steps were followed in general: (a) free association and exploratory noting while immersed in the data of one participant, (b) development of experiential statements for the same participant, (c) construction of personal experiential themes (PETs) for the participant, (d) progression to another participant with repetition of the first three steps, (e) creation of group experiential themes (GETs) based on connections of PETs across participants, (f) deep contextual, temporal, and theoretical interpretation across participants, PETs, and GETs. These steps are described in greater detail below.

Organization of Data

To organize the data, I immersed myself in the data of one participant at a time (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I became familiar with the semi-structured interview transcripts thoroughly. Each participant was identified and anonymized. Secondary data were only examined and organized after the initial rounds of interviews were coded to avoid influence by information within the secondary data. All transcripts and secondary data were uploaded into NVivo (Lumivvero, 2024) version 15.3.1 for coding, thematic analysis, and reporting.

Data Coding

Exploratory noting occurred during data organization and the initial review of the transcripts (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These notes contained emotions, concepts, actions, relationships, places, events, comparisons, values, and so forth. Codes were derived from direct statements in the transcripts rather than implied meanings (Wæraas, 2022). Explicit coding ensures an inductive approach to a strongly data-driven analysis. Coding began as *in vivo*, then evolved to be descriptive and continued to be supported by direct quotations (Saldaña, 2021). This aligned with the semantic, rather than latent, approach to the analysis.

Each participant's transcripts were coded through an iterative cycle. In the first pass, anything of interest was noted (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Second, line-by-line analysis occurred. Next, iteration happened so that recoding occurred as necessary. Coding evolved into experiential statements containing my first interpretations. Subsequently, codes were refined as PETs and GETs were established. I did all the coding. Exploratory notes and analytic memos were created directly in the NVivo (Lumivvero, 2024) software to facilitate later analysis and data auditing.

Theme Development

Analysis began after coding was complete, however the themes were iteratively revisited. In keeping with the two-phased approach of IPA, the codes were first analyzed descriptively. The codes from each participant were assessed individually. Connections across experiential concepts were creatively established as PETs within each participant's data by examining clusters and patterns (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Sub-themes were identified, too. The entire codebook can be reviewed in Appendix C.

Subsequently, I assessed the connections of the PETs across participants to form GETs (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Given the idiographic nature of IPA, the uniqueness of each case must be retained while synthesizing patterns across them. I focused on divergence and convergence across participants and finally deeply interpreted the PETs and GETs. This analysis provided a holistic, phenomenological analysis of employees' sensemaking of their lived experiences.

Assumptions

Assumptions are the conscious or unconscious beliefs that underlie and potentially affect research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is based on robust data only obtained from interaction between the researcher and their participants (Bloomberg, 2023). This leads to the assumption that the researcher's own experiences and inherent biases may affect the study throughout planning, data collection, and analysis. My worldview lies somewhere between pragmatism and social constructionism.

This research study assumed an emic perspective. An emic lens assumes that reality is subjective and that the person who lived an experience is its best interpreter (Yin, 2015). This also means that multiple realities are possible. Finally, this study also embraced the concept of Dasein (Heidegger, 1962), in which people are fundamentally intertwined with their world and shaped by their past experiences, current situations, and future possibilities.

Limitations

Limitations are external factors that represent weaknesses that can affect the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Bloomberg, 2023). Due to its covert and morality-laden nature, research about unethical situations can be challenging (Hassan et al., 2023). Speaking about participating in unethical activities can be especially difficult. To mitigate this limitation, I reassured the participants of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data. Moreover,

limiting the study participants to former employees reduced the threat of consequences for their honesty.

Another limitation was that participants must communicate in English sufficiently to articulate detailed descriptions of their experiences in a language I can understand. I recruited volunteers in English and pre-screened potential participants to ensure communication was not a barrier. However, this eliminated participants from the study who are not fluent in English or have difficulty communicating verbally.

Delimitations

Delimitations are purposeful conditions or constraints applied by the investigator that confine the scope of the research (Bloomberg, 2023). The first delimitation was context; context is crucial in qualitative research, as the participants' experiences cannot be separated from it (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, this research was limited to former employees of a biomedical firm within the United States. These employees had to have participated in activities that supported fraudulent or unethical activities at work or recognized unethical activities of their colleagues.

A second goal was, if possible, to have all participants be former employees of the same corporation; this was accomplished and ensures that the unethical experience referenced by participants was similar. Homogeneity of experience is a key component of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Such consistency supports idiography, a core commitment of IPA, and the enhanced ability to interpret divergences within the research findings.

The delimitations described above enabled better understanding of why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations and how social identification with their leadership influenced employees' actions. The constraints centered the investigation on similar experiences of corruption. This focus allowed analysis and

interpretation of parallels and contrasts within the perceptions of various employees. The delimitations helped address the paucity of data about corruption in biomedical corporations (Transparency International, 2016), especially from the employee's perspective. Ultimately, the learnings from this research can be applied to prevent or mitigate complicit follower behavior that is necessary for unhealthy corporations to thrive.

Ethical Assurances

All ethical research must abide by three primary principles: respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The study displayed respect for individuals through informed consent, anonymization, and confidentiality processes. To ensure informed consent, I shared the objectives of the dissertation, a description of the interview process, and foreseen risks and benefits (Hicks, 2019). I informed the volunteer that pseudonyms would be used for data collection and reporting, so confidentiality was maintained. Data were stored on a protected drive, and any printed materials were stored in a locked safe in my home office. Volunteers were informed that they could refuse to answer questions and withdraw from the study at any time.

The National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research before collecting data (Appendix D). I obtained consent (Appendix E) and conducted the interviews in a nonjudgemental and considerate manner. Given the recall of memories regarding unethical activities, the participants may have experienced some distress during the interview process. The risk of distress was minimal, especially compared to the research benefits. Therefore, the study provided beneficence. I also upheld the final pillar, justice. No protected groups were used in this research, and participants had complete autonomy in participating. Individuals were recruited

fairly, and all participants were treated equally. Therefore, no volunteer experienced more or less risk or benefit than another.

While I do not have experience within an obviously corrupt organization, I do have experience within the biomedical field. I have worked in direct patient care, case management, medical research, and healthcare information technology for over thirty years in government and commercial sectors. The researcher is deeply involved in the phenomenological process; therefore, preconceptions and experiences must be acknowledged (Smith et al., 2022). To mitigate this, I identified these potential biases and bracketed, or set them aside, prior to interviewing participants. Moreover, since all influences may not have been identified proactively, IPA promotes cyclic review of the bracketed information throughout the data analysis. I applied the best practice of cyclic review during reflexive analysis.

Summary

Toxic corporations can harm societies globally, with biomedical firms posing significant risks and disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities. The level of corruption within the workplace depends on how much employees cooperate with the corruption. Despite this, existing research focuses more on DL and organizational culture that promotes corruption, creating a gap in knowledge about followership. This study sought to understand why some employees become cooperative followers in corrupt biomedical corporations. This qualitative, phenomenological study aimed to explore how United States based employees who identify with their leadership are influenced in corrupt corporations. The participants were examined to understand their emotional state, thinking, and behavior, ultimately to prevent corruption.

This chapter began with a narrative of the qualitative research methodology and interpretive phenomenological analysis design that was used. The rationale for choosing the

method and design was presented along with a review of alternative designs. The chapter continued with a discussion of the population and sample, including the approach to sampling and recruitment. The semi-structured interview was reviewed as the primary data collection instrument. Data collection strategies were also provided for secondary sources, such as publicly available interviews and court testimony, to promote triangulation.

The study procedures, data collection, and data analysis were described in depth. This chapter also provided the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, which are crucial considerations within the study's findings. These processes are the foundation of the study's trustworthiness, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem to be addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. The biomedical industry is highly complex and vulnerable to corruption (Mackey et al., 2016). Transparency International (2016) identified the paucity of data about corruption as a major challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. Complicit employees are required to execute corporate corruption successfully (Mawritz et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007). Without a better understanding of cooperative followers, efforts to prevent corruption will fail, and corrupt organizations will continue to have a widespread impact (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). Society at large will continue to be harmed through threats to public health (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024) with vulnerable populations disproportionately harmed (Al Qudah et al., 2025).

Research has primarily focused on leadership and corporate culture, leaving the third crucial element, the role of employees in corruption, less understood (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Researchers have called for more studies about the influences on employee behavior as cooperative followers. Steele et al. (2024) noted the limitations in employees' sensemaking of unethical dilemmas. Yang et al. (2022) recommended studying morality-based emotions and thinking to understand unethical follower behavior in the workplace. Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) suggested examining factors mediating employee behavior in response to immoral leader requests. Haslam et al. (2023) called for further research on the destructive activities co-created by followers and leaders, grounded in social identification

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are

influenced within a corrupt corporation. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design was chosen to explore employees' complex lived experiences (Farrell, 2020) during their involvement in unethical activity at their employer's behest. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted with seven former employees of a large, private, biomedical company recognized by the United States Department of Justice for its corrupt practices. For the purposes of this study, this firm shall be referred to as Palte. Participants are referred to as P1, P2, and so forth.

The chapter presents an in-depth review of the trustworthiness of the study, including its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This chapter continues with the results of the qualitative analysis of the study participants' semi-structured interviews and sources of triangulation. The chapter also includes a discussion of key findings, themes, and comparison of results with the literature review. The findings presented answer the two research questions posed regarding the lived experiences of employees within the United States who support unethical activities in biomedical corporations and how their social identification with a leader influences actions during unethical dilemmas.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthy data is the foundation of trustworthy qualitative research (Smith et al., 2022). Trustworthiness is defined through the criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study implemented many best practices of qualitative research to increase and ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility of the data refers to the degree to which the researcher's findings and assessments can be trusted, that is, whether the findings are true, reasonable, and comprehensive

(Enworo, 2023). To ensure credibility, I focused on member checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation of data sources. Member checking allowed the participants to confirm the interpretations of their interviews (Ahmed, 2024). After analysis was completed, participants were provided with the thematically aligned preliminary findings via email to confirm my interpretation accurately reflected their intentions. All participants had one week to respond with any feedback and were informed that no response would indicate their agreement with interpretation. Three participants responded, and no corrections were received.

Prolonged engagement increases rapport between the researcher and the participant (Ahmed, 2024), which increases confidence in the findings from the perspective of the participant. Rapport and trust were established between me and the participant via written and verbal communications prior to and during the interview. Participants clearly became more comfortable as their interview progressed, as exhibited by increased composure and trust. Nonverbal cues such as facial expression, relaxed voices, willingness to be vulnerable, and high talk time (Burgoon et al., 2021) are hallmarks of composure and trust. High talk time was evidenced by the average interview length of 75 minutes, 15 minutes longer than scheduled, with four interviews lasting over 80 minutes. Three participants followed up later with positive comments for the researcher.

Credibility from the perspective of the researcher was gained through triangulation. Data triangulation is the use of multiple data sources to corroborate findings from the participants. I used multiple data sources to triangulate the data. These sources included audio interviews and recorded depositions with former Palte employees obtained through ABC News' 2019–2022 podcast series. Audio and video interviews and depositions of former employees were obtained through a 2019 HBO documentary. I transcribed and analyzed these sources. Former employees

in the triangulation data sources are referred to as T1, T2, and so forth. Former employees in corporate leadership roles are labeled CL1, CL2, and so forth. Journalists and Palte board members are indicated by J# and B#, respectively.

Since the criminal trials of CL1 and CL2 were not recorded, news reports were assessed for testimony, statements about the evidence presented, and the witnesses' demeanor. All media sources operated within recognized ethical or editorial standards, in the form of explicit codes, corporate conduct policies, or established professional norms. These assurances provided sufficient grounding to treat them as credible as triangulation sources. The triangulation materials were coded using the same NVivo procedures as primary interview transcripts.

A 2022 investigative journalism book was used as another source of triangulation. The book includes interviews with more than 60 former employees. This non-fiction narrative contains verbatim quotes from the former employees, emails, and legal depositions and was used for corroborative evidence. Additionally, limited court testimony was reviewed due to the cost of retrieval.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which data analysis, findings, and interpretations are applicable to contexts outside of the situation where the data were gathered (Ahmed, 2024). By providing detailed descriptions of the sampling strategy, inclusion criteria, and data, the reader can judge the applicability of findings to alternative circumstances. Additionally, the reader is provided with thick descriptions of the participants' experiences which include organizational context, roles, interpersonal dynamics, and situational conditions to more fully support transferability. I reported the participants' rich descriptions of their involvement in and knowledge of fraudulent, corrupt, or unethical activities. This included participants' perceptions

of leadership, their colleagues, events, and the participants' related emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses.

Participants were recruited for participation via LinkedIn, an online professional networking platform. Approximately 800 individuals on LinkedIn self-identify as former employees of Palte, a biomedical company well-publicized for corrupt and criminal activities. I found participants through criterion sampling, a type of purposive sampling, which provided a homogenous group of former employees of Palte who had observed or participated in unethical corporate behavior (Table 2). The participants were all formerly employed in the human resources or research and development (R&D) departments at Palte who shared similar exposure to unethical leadership and corporate culture. The participants varied in their length of employment at Palte (from 1–7years), time of their employment during Palte's existence (early, mid, and late), highest level of education, and their generational cohort.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Department	Years at Palte	Time of tenure	Education level	Generational cohort
P1	Human resources	1	late	Bachelor's	millennial
P2	R & D	1	early	Master's	X
P3	R & D	3	mid	Doctoral	baby boomer
P4	Human resources	2.5	mid to late	Bachelor's	X
P5	R & D	1.5	early	Master's	baby boomer
P6	R & D	2	mid to late	Doctoral	X
P7	R & D	7	mid to late	Bachelor's	traditional

Note. Time of tenure aligns with the participant's employment during the following time periods at Palte: early = 2003–2007, mid = 2008–2010, late = 2011 and beyond.

I contacted potential participants through LinkedIn's InMail messaging feature with a recruitment message (Appendix F) that was previously approved by National University's Institutional Review Board. The message included a brief description of the study and a request to respond to me if they met the inclusion criteria (Sikkens et al., 2017).

The inclusion criteria were (a) an adult who was employed for at least 3 months in the United States for a biomedical company, (b) doubted the public claims of the company during their employment, (c) participated in activities that supported fraudulent claims, and/or (d) recognized unethical activities of their colleagues. Ultimately, I was able to recruit enough participants from a single biomedical corporation.

I originally set out to interview three to 10 participants based on the recommendations for IPA sample sizes (Smith et al., 2022). I contacted 172 former employees of Palte via LinkedIn. Seven individuals ultimately participated, while 15 opted out immediately or after learning more about the study. Three individuals responded in a hostile manner; five respondents felt they did not meet the inclusion criteria, and the remaining 144 people did not respond to the initial or follow-up communications. I achieved data saturation with five participants, as no substantive codes were added after the fourth participant. However, seven former employees were ultimately interviewed.

Dependability

Dependability reflects the extent to which research findings remain steady and reliable across different points in time (Bloomberg, 2023). This is accomplished by clearly describing the research methodology and design along with auditing the decision-making during data analysis so that the study can be replicated. A qualitative, IPA was conducted for this dissertation. This methodology allowed me to deeply explore the lived experiences (Yin, 2015) of United States-

based former employees of a corrupt biomedical corporation alongside their relationships with leadership.

Hermeneutics was used, given the philosophical foundation of IPA. Hermeneutics originated as a method of making meaning from ancient written text (Heidegger, 1962). Hermeneutics has expanded dramatically and can be applied to many forms of written material (Lavery, 2003). Therefore, this method was applied to publicly available court and interview transcripts of former employees of Palte. These materials were coded using the same NVivo procedures as primary interview transcripts to support the study's dependability through triangulation (Bloomberg, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted via video teleconference with seven former employees of Palte. The semi-structured interview comprised open-ended questions about participants' relationships with managers and corporate leaders as well as their actions and perceptions of unethical activity within their workplace. The interview protocol was developed iteratively with the assistance of dissertation committee members (Naz et al., 2022). Then, the interview was field tested with a co-worker to assess the questions' timing, comprehensiveness, and clarity and to ensure a conversational tone. The interview questions allowed the study of the following constructs: relational identification with a leader, collective identity, ideological emphasis, value alignment with a leader and group, and willingness to adapt behavior.

Data analysis proceeded as follows. Initial analysis began as I took notes during the interview to ask follow-up questions and enhance the later analysis of the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed immediately after the session. Immediately following the interview, I performed exploratory noting, elaborating on notes and capturing initial

impressions. Second, I verified the transcriptions line by line with the recording and added non-verbal utterances such as laughter, hesitation, or change in tone. This phase provided deep immersion into the data.

Identifying information was redacted while the transcripts were read and re-read. The redacted transcripts were then uploaded into the NVivo analytic software (Lumivero, 2024). The transcripts underwent line-by-line data collection, which is considered the gold standard for subsequent qualitative analysis (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Initial codes were derived from direct statements in the transcripts, ensuring an inductive approach for a strongly data-driven analysis (Wæraas, 2022). These codes were categorized according to the research questions. Annotations were documented which combined the participant's words and my interpretation. As codes were identified with later participants, the analyst revisited previously coded transcripts to review the data in context of the new codes. After analysis of the fourth participant's transcript, no substantively new codes were added.

Next, personal experiential themes (PETs) were identified for each participant. As analysis continued, codes were merged, expanded, and nested as connections across participants emerged. These resulted in group experiential themes (GETs). Finally, I analyzed deep contextual, temporal, and theoretical interpretation across participants, PETs, and GETs.

All steps of the analysis and decisions were captured in my research journal. Analysis was also audited within the NVivo software. The codebook was exported after each participant to capture the evolution of codes and references at seven points in time. The research journal contained documentation of research activities, insights, and potential data patterns. The journal, codebooks, and software served as a comprehensive audit trail, which provides transparency and dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures the data and findings are empirically derived from the data, impartial, and not subjected to the researcher's biases (Ahmed, 2024). Confirmability is increased through triangulation, reflexive analysis, and participant verification. Triangulation data were collected from publicly available audio interviews and depositions, video recordings, investigative journalism, and court reporting to promote triangulation. Testimony is recognized as a rich data source since court witnesses have experienced the incident they are describing and engage in processes to make sense of that event (van der Heiden, 2021). Written accounts, such as court transcription, contain exact verbiage but do not capture non-verbal cues or periods of silence, which are important in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007). However, applying hermeneutics to purely written material is widely accepted (Laverty, 2003).

While it may be impossible to fully remove an analyst's preconceptions (Smith et al., 2022), every effort was taken to acknowledge and bracket out such influences. I adopted an inductive coding approach, with codes emerging from the data in a data-driven manner (Saldaña, 2021). Findings, themes, and interpretations were supported by direct quotations from the participants and from triangulation data sources. As such, data and interpretations are primarily semantic rather than latent.

I used reflexivity to acknowledge personal biases and preconceptions which increased the objectivity of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. Reflexivity is a foundational practice of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), one of the theoretical frameworks of this research. Reflexivity is a strategy used to understand how a researcher's worldview, biases, and experiences influence the interpretation of a participant's experiences. A research journal served as an instrument for reflective thinking (Bloomberg, 2023). I identified potential biases and

bracketed, or set them aside, prior to interviewing participants. Moreover, since all influences may not be identified proactively, I applied the best practice of cyclic review. This reflexive analysis occurred during idiographic and cross-case analysis. The analyst also used the research journal to maintain a reflective and insightful perspective (Bloomberg, 2023). Finally, member checking allowed the participants to verify their transcripts. Moreover, member checking allowed the participants to confirm the interpretations of their interviews (Ahmed, 2024).

Results

This qualitative study showed how former employees of Palte, a biomedical company recognized for criminally fraudulent activity, experienced and understood their experiences, as well as how social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas influenced those experiences. Participant interviews provided rich insight into how they perceived their experiences emotionally, cognitively, and morally, and how participants related to corporate leadership, their direct supervisors, and their colleagues. The results are presented in alignment with the following two research questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was “What are the lived experiences of employees within the United States who support unethical activities in biomedical corporations?” Participants reported a plethora of experiences. Using coding and thematic analysis within the NVivo qualitative data analysis platform (Lumivero, 2024), three themes were identified: range of emotions in the workplace, workplace conditions supporting corruption, and justifications for thoughts and actions in the workplace. Each theme comprised multiple sub-themes.

Theme 1: Range of Emotions in the Workplace. Eight primary emotion categories were identified based on Plutchik’s wheel of emotions (Roeckelein, 2006): fear, sadness, anger,

disgust, anticipation, happiness, surprise, and trust. Each of these emotion categories represents a sub-theme within the results. Several primary emotions were further divided into related secondary feelings when participants reported similar constructs. Descriptions of each emotional code are included in Appendix C.

Fear. Six of seven participants reported feelings of fear. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of fear such as helplessness, apprehension, rejection, bewilderment, inadequacy, insignificance, embarrassment, anxiety, insecurity, confusion, and being overwhelmed or discouraged are categorized together. The emotion of fear was also discovered in the triangulation of data sources.

Fear of retaliation was prevalent. Four participants described fear of being fired as a common occurrence. P5 stated, “so many people disappeared. I mean, our chief operating officer...the next thing you know, his office is empty. And you're like, oh, wondering, she pissed him or he pissed her off?” P4, who worked in the human resources department, stated, “People would just be [pause] gone.” He continued, “People didn't say anything...people were afraid to get let go.” P6 argued that speaking up “sounds easy...but I can tell you, it's not like that in real life.” P3, who was a team lead, emphasized that his colleagues were “very, very, very circumspect about criticism [pause] and circumspect about saying anything.” P3, who left Palte in 2010, clarified that this fear specifically related to “everybody getting fired.”

Fear of job loss was commonly found in the triangulation data as well. For example, former laboratory assistant, T1 reported that “People were very scared of upsetting CL1 and upsetting CL2...People were blatantly saying that they were scared of losing their jobs” (Jarvis, 2019a, 7:12). T2, a fellow lab assistant stressed in a deposition “You don’t want to be on their radar...That was the culture. People knew; they would say, ‘Oh, don’t speak up or, you know,

you'd get fired.' There was definitely a culture of fear" (Jarvis, 2019a, 16:58). Former laboratory director, T11 testified, "I thought I might be fired if I took a strong position" (Atkins, 2021g, para. 23). T7, Palte's chief scientist from 2005–2013 was fired, immediately rehired, and later assumed he would be fired again for voicing his concerns to CL1 and CL2 (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 143).

Former employees were also fearful of retaliation via legal action. P5 was sued by Palte after he resigned from the firm. He remains concerned that CL1 could sue him again in the future, stating, "Yeah, it's in the back of my mind." During his employment with Palte, P4 wondered, "Why am I gonna stick my neck out and get sued? 'Cause I don't have deep pockets to deal with that."

After P6 resigned, he coordinated with current and past employees to expose problematic validation laboratory practices. "I heard from a lot of them, you know, how scared they were...They [reported] private detectives...following the car, following to their home, following to work." These reports were confirmed through triangulation. Whistleblower T1 stated, "I was super paranoid and had a burner phone and was absolutely scared and terrified" (Jarvis, 2021b, 15:27). When T1 started her new job "They had had someone sit outside my work, at my new job. And it scared my own co-workers" (Jarvis, 2019a, 34:42).

Fellow whistleblower T2 said, "I was definitely in a panic. ...It was quite, quite scary for me...I was, what, 23 at that point? You know, I had not really, not really any money to spend on lawyers or anything. I was really freaked out" (Gibney, 2019, 1:29:40). T2 tried to discuss the situation with his family member (B1), who was a Palte investor and board member (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 240). However, B1 believed what CL1 was telling him and recommended T2 sign a non-disclosure agreement with Palte legal counsel. When T2 received a notice to appear in court

and a temporary restraining order, he “was extremely nervous” (Gibney, 2019, 1:35:32). T2 recalled, “They really made me feel like I was alone. I was the underdog. I was going to get crushed” (1:35:44).

The former manager of assay systems, T3, who was provided criminal immunity by government (Jarvis, 2021b, 25:55), admitted to violating company policy by emailing documentation to her personal account to protect herself, testifying “I was scared that [the large company’s launch] would not go well. And I was also worried that I would be blamed” (Jarvis, 2021b, 27:17). T11, a former lab director at Palte, also testified that he forwarded emails to his personal account “to protect himself against federal probes” (Atkins, 2021e, para. 20). T7, Palte’s chief science officer, serves as an especially salient example of this fear. T7 was witness in a patent lawsuit that placed him in a moral conflict. He committed suicide the night before he was due to testify (Gibney, 2019, 53:51). P3 stated “There’s no doubt in my mind that T7 was scared all the time.”

In trying to make sense of their experiences, several participants voiced learned helplessness. P6 noted, “If you see people getting fired left and right and you try to do the best thing you can, but all of your suggestions and your opinions don’t go anywhere, at one point you’re just giving up.” When P5 proposed reasonable solutions to a troublesome plan, CL1 “basically listened, and [when] the results came out days later, and there was no change in [her plan].” T1 testified similarly, “It was starting to get very uncomfortable, and very stressful for me working at the company...I was attempting to tell as many people as I could, but just not seeming to get through to people” (Atkins, 2021a, para. 16). P4, in his role within the human resources department, felt that the helplessness employees felt was a driving factor of the rapid turnover at Palte:

There wasn't anybody to go to because CL2 and CL1 were in charge of everything. So, who are you going to go argue against? ...It was like, you can either stay and be part of it or go... There wasn't any middle ground. And they didn't want people there that were going to question anything because they weren't going to change... Just everything bounces off a wall and nothing happens, and you can't fix the problems that you could see that were happening.

Several former employees reported fatigue as dimension of fear. For example, P1 reported the ongoing negative public opinion was “hard to take.” He cancelled his subscription to the Wall Street Journal and avoided journalists outside the Palte office because he felt “like a punching bag.” Assay developer T4, left Palte in September 2013, the month of a large, well-known company’s launch because “he couldn’t take it anymore” (Jarvis, 2021a, 30:17).

There were many reports of generalized anxiety as well. T3 was “very stressed and unhappy and concerned” (Atkins, 2021b, para. 3). A senior customer service manager recounted, “I lost sleep. I became an insomniac during that period. It was tough, extremely tough” (Jarvis, 2021a, 16:02). T1 testified, “It was starting to get very uncomfortable, and very stressful for me working at the company” (Atkins, 2021a, para. 16). P4 reported, “It was stressful. There was a lot of hard work and whenever people are working 10, 12 hour days, it's not exactly great.” T11 testified that he felt “tremendous pressure” and “a lot of emotional discomfort” because the corporate leaders badgered him to “justify erroneous results” from improperly modified testing devices (Atkins, 2021d, para. 16).

P5 reported questioning his abilities, when communicating his concerns yielded no change, “You start to obviously question yourself, ‘Do you have the skill sets to pull this off, right?’” Former Palte employees also reported feeling conflicted and confused. T4 questioned his

reality, “You start to believe that maybe you're the one who's crazy. Because everyone else thinks this woman's great...wants to throw money at her...wants to be a part of it. Sometimes, you have to think maybe you're wrong” (Gibney, 2019, 1:24:46). Likewise, T2 vacillated on his steadfastness:

We're on a sinking ship. Everything's a lie. Reconciling the differences between those two worlds was really hard for me to do. I really trusted her. I believed in her. And I would be so motivated to go back and work, and I felt like I was changing the world again. You want it to be true so badly, and even for me, I was working with these devices every single day, and she could still kind of convince me. When I think back on those conversations, I just think, how did she do that? (Gibney, 2019, 1:23:47)

Sadness. Six of the seven (86%) study participants reported feelings of sadness. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of sadness such as disappointment, guilt, betrayal, depression, remorse, shame, isolation, or hopelessness are categorized together. The emotion of sadness was also found in the triangulation data sources.

P2 reported, “We were very disappointed and [had] very negative feelings about what happened.” Similarly, P6 stated, “Sometimes it was actually problems you could easily fix, but nobody was listening...We were all kind of disappointed how it went.” P7 realized in 2011, one year into his seven-year tenure at Palte, that “this thing’s never going to fly.”

Participant 3 spoke candidly about his former teammate who later took a lead role in adjusting processes and modifying Siemens blood testing equipment to run diagnostics on reduced volumes of blood. This practice nullified the machine’s FDA accreditation and potentially put patients’ lives at risk (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 169). P3 was disappointed by this colleague’s actions, “He lost his moral compass...I was bitterly disappointed. He sold out.”

Examples of disappointment were found in the triangulation data too. Palte's manager of assay systems, T3 testified, "It seemed like a huge let-down from all the hard work that was collected...It felt that my effort and efforts from my team members were going to waste" (Atkins, 2021b, para. 6). T1 testified that "her hopes and dreams were dashed" (Atkins, 2021a, para. 26). T2 decided to resign he determined, "It was getting to the point where there was really no hope" (Gibney, 2019, 1:28:42).

Three participants felt somewhat guilty about events during their tenure at the company. With no notice, P4's direct supervisor required that P4 represent Palte in a small claims court appearance. P4 negotiated an "unfair" settlement with two former employees of Palte, whom he had recommended for the jobs. P4 conceded, "I never talked to them again. Yeah, no, I didn't feel good about it at all."

Although P1 was in the human resources department, in 2016, he helped enter test data and found "the results were bad...there was [*sic*] either false positives, false negatives." Upon reflection, P1 recognized that the "sin" of the company was "going live, putting patients' lives at risk, [pause] with the technology that wasn't working." P1 "felt a little, a little bad about it."

Several participants felt betrayed by the company's leadership. P4 had a close relationship with CL1 and CL2 for the first year of his tenure. P4 played a crucial role in growing the personnel roster rapidly. But in 2013, that relationship shifted. "CL2 would always say, 'Good morning.' And then, it just was amazing... he buzzed by me the whole week, and, like, never said a word." P4 felt betrayed and saddened by this. "If you're a founding part of the company, you just expect them to treat you a certain way."

P1 emphasized that he felt "sympathetic" towards Palte and CL1. He felt CL1 had been unfairly punished for her actions and was saddened by that, "I think if she wasn't a woman, she

wouldn't have had such a hard fall." P1 felt betrayed by the press' portrayal of CL1 avowing, "As quickly as they build you up, they bring you down."

Several participants described devastation upon learning that their colleague, T7, had committed suicide in relation to his employment at Palte. By all accounts, T7, the chief scientist, was a highly respected, ethics-driven biochemist who was well-liked. P3 called him a "sweet, sweet" man. P4 described T7 as "amazing," "funny," and "super smart." T9, vice president of product development, described T7 as "a wealth of knowledge" who mentored younger staff. P4 described T7 as "really close to [CL1]" but that later "she kind of boxed him out." P7 was dismayed while recalling a time CL1 had removed T7 from his "really nice office" and placed him "in the general population." CL1 had "started excluding T7 from [leadership] meetings." P7 asserted it "was very demeaning."

P7 recalled a conversation with T7 when T7 "slapped his hand on the table" and declared "It's never going to work...I don't know what we're going to do." T9 could see "how marginalized" T7 had become and that he was "trying to make the best of his situation." However, T9 continued, "In about 2012, T7 didn't have an office anymore. I think he felt slighted by that. He wasn't involved with decision-making. He would look at data, and he said things were not working." T7's widow, T8, stated, "T7 really got into bad shape with CL2...both CL2 and CL1, because there's so many things wrong with that technology."

In early 2013, T7 was notified he would testify on Palte's behalf regarding a patent lawsuit which could have invalidated some of the patents. This placed T7 in a precarious position between his morality and his loyalty to the company. P7 alleged, "If [Ian] took one side, he would be seen to be, you know, not truthful. If he took the other side, he would be, you know, disloyal to her...He felt like there was no way out for it." As the deposition neared, T7 feared he

would be fired and “fell into a deep depression” (Gibney, 2019, 53:07). According to T8, “He was so distraught over this stupid, patent case...and not knowing what he was going to do with the rest of his life. And that's why he committed suicide” in May 2013 (Gibney, 2019, 53:34).

Despite T7 having worked at Palte for eight years, Palte did not express condolences to his widow or notify his colleagues (Carreyrou, 2022, p. 148; Gibney, 2019, 53:57). Knowing T7 had earlier battled cancer, several colleagues assumed he had been fired or died of the disease. P3 relayed, “I had to look it up and find out that it was actually suicide.”

Anger. Four of the seven participants reported feelings of anger. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of anger such as frustration, annoyance, hostility, irritation, criticality, hate, or selfishness are categorized together. The emotion of anger was also found in triangulation sources.

P3 was a senior leader who reported directly to CL2. P3 recounted a few angry conversations he had with CL2. Recalling that his concerns about Palte using their technology to detect H1N1 virus, also known as swine flu, in Thailand and Mexico and track cytokine storms to predict sepsis in burn patients were ignored, P3 declared, “Damn right, it’s life or death!” Participant 3 also described CL2 questioning that P3 had bought his R&D team T-shirts as Christmas gifts. CL2 “stormed” into P3’s office fuming, “How dare you?” After “years” of this type of behavior from CL2, P3 “finally said, ‘The hell with you. I don’t need you. See ya!’” and submitted his resignation letter. P3 recounted that CL2 initially refused to accept his resignation which prompted him to declare, “What makes you think you have a choice?”

Participants reported feeling frustrated during their time with Palte. P4 stated, “It became very frustrating...We were trying to make things work and then nothing would work...It got to the point of super frustration on my part.” P5 was an R&D manager who described consistently

reporting problems that his team encountered to CL1. In one example, P5's concerns again went unheeded, "A couple of days later, she came back, the same requirements, the same schedule." At this point he resigned, saying "I just can't professionally sign up for this."

P7 spent seven years at Palte advising the corporate leaders on business strategy, but his concerns typically were disregarded, resulting in frustration, "It's not going to work. Never, never, never, never!" P3 explained his frustration when his recommendations were ignored, "They would not hear [suggestions]...They refused. This was her dream. This was what she was meant to do. Of course, we'll make it work"

Former employees reported frustration through the triangulation data as well. For example, T3 testified that she was frustrated by the corporate leaders' demand that project teams within Palte could not share information with each other (Atkins, 2021b, para. 10). T6, a former researcher at Palte, suggested "The laws of physics just are not going to permit us to [do this]" (Gibney, 2019, 49:44). He was frustrated by the responses, such as, "Maybe you're not a Silicon Valley person. You should go work for some other company...if you don't believe in the vision of the product" (49:50). T5, a former engineer at Palte, was frustrated by the protections CL1 seem to have through her high-profile connections, stating "I thought [Palte] was going to get away with it" (1:25:18)

T10, the lab director at Palte from December 2013–May 2014, testified that CL1 and CL2 frequently ignored his communications of concerns and undermined his authority over the laboratory (Atkins, 2022a, para. 20). T10 testified about his frustration, saying "asking repeatedly [was] akin to hitting my head against the wall" (para. 21). T11 worked at Palte from April 2013–December 2014 and served as sole lab director for the last six months of his tenure (Carreyrou, 2022). He testified it was "difficult, if not impossible" to effectively do his job

because he “was left out of emails” and “essentially lied to” (Atkins, 2022b, para. 20). T11’s requests for resources to improve proficiency testing were met with “lip service.” (Atkins, 2021e, Section 18). T11 was placed in the position of defending the erratic test results due to “serious issues” when physicians questioned them testifying, “I was frustrated by the inability to explain discrepant results” (Atkins, 2021f, para. 22).

Disgust. Two of the seven participants reported feelings of disgust. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of disgust such as patronization, or skepticism, or loathing are categorized together. The emotion of disgust was more prevalent in the triangulation sources.

Participant 3 described several times that he felt patronized and insulted by CL2, his direct supervisor. When raising concerns CL2 responded with, “oh, don’t you worry your little head about it. We know what we’re doing. We got it under control.” P3 conveyed a lingering sense of disgust for the response saying, “my 40 years of experience, but they know what they’re talking about? I see. Don’t treat me like I’m an idiot. I won’t have it.” P3 recounted a similar scenario with CL2, “don’t lie to me. When you lie to me, you’re telling me, ‘I’m too stupid to tell the truth.’ And I promise you I’m not. So don’t lie to me.” P3 explained an encounter during which CL2 “came in one morning, he’s holding a book. He’s shaking the book in our face. He goes, ‘I sat up all last night and read this book, and I now know everything you do.’” Similarly, P3 described reading a final draft of a patent application on which CL1’s name was listed first. P3 objected, “She did nothing!...She didn’t even understand [the science]. She did nothing. Just come off it, don’t you dare. So, when she talks about all the patents she’s had? Please!”

P1 became skeptical in August 2016 based on public feedback of Palte. “That’s when I started questioning things. The reception was very negative, the external reception, and then we had the layoff.” P1, who worked in the human resources department, continued, “We weren’t

growing as much anymore...I was doing odd stuff. Like, for instance, there was the data entry work we had to do. There was [*sic*] these test results from Arizona...basically digitizing these test results [that were] filled with errors.”

T11, the former lab director, was troubled by providing test results to patients. He testified, ““My conscience was bothered...I was really bothered by what I had experienced at the company. I said to CL2 on my last day [that] it wasn't worth my reputation to stay at the company" (Atkins, 2022b, para. 19). After feeling “pressured to vouch for results he cannot be confident in” T11 requested to be removed as lab director (Atkins, 2021e, para. 22). Upon his departure he refused to shake CL2’s hand.

A senior customer service manager reported that it “common knowledge” how frequently complaints were received about Palte’s test results varying from other laboratories were received (Jarvis, 2021b, 15:27). The manager said the laboratory patronized him by “gaslighting” and downplaying concerns stating, “ok, well, that can happen” (15:49). When T1 reported her concerns about test result quality to CL2, he snapped, “You need to sit down and keep your mouth shut...you don’t know what you’re talking about” (Jarvis, 2019a, p. 17:25). T4 condemned the cherry picking of data to get appropriate results, “That's not the way you approach science that's going to be impacting people's lives” (Gibney, 2019, 1:18:39).

Anticipation. Five of the seven participants reported feelings of anticipation. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of anticipation such as optimism, excitement, interest, and vigilance are categorized together. Aspects of anticipation were also found in the triangulation data sources.

P4 was excited and optimistic about Palte and its mission. “I was excited about the mission. I can see why there was all the excitement because I was, I was just jazzed about it.” P4

supported the vision however he could. “That's why I was giving my own blood. I give my own blood all the time...I was really into the whole thing.” He continued, “I thought I was going to hit it big and be part of something great. People were impressed that I was there. You know, I was impressed that I was there...How did I get so lucky to be part of this?”

P1 was motivated to join Palte because of its mission. “I came in focused on the mission, excited about the mission...[CL1] was a very charismatic leader. You get this letter when you joined, and it really excites you.” P5 stated, “Like everybody else, we drank the Kool-Aid from CL1. You know, revolutionizing personalized medicine is...something I strive for.” P2 was “more motivated” by company-wide meetings stating, “Everyone always felt more energized, more positive.”

Even before joining Palte, eventual whistleblower T1 was excited about CL1. “I was probably the first person to really, like, drink the Kool-Aid. And I had read all the articles about [CL1] and was completely infatuated about this amazing female entrepreneur” (Jarvis, 2019a). Similarly, T2 was optimistic about the mission. “I was in love with her vision...I was totally sold on [it]” (Jarvis, 2019a, 10:40). He said:

[CL1] kind of pitched her dream of changing the way diagnostics is done, really revolutionizing the field. Yeah, I was totally gung-ho about Palte. I was really excited about what she was talking about. Like, I want to work on this. This sounds amazing. (Gibney, 2019)

Happiness. Three of the seven participants reported feelings of happiness. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of happiness such as joy, serenity, energy, cheerfulness, fascination, stimulation, creativity, and hopefulness are categorized together. Aspects of happiness were not found in the triangulation data.

P2, who worked at Palte from 2006–2007, conveyed, “When I worked there it was overall it was positive experience.” A few participants really enjoyed working at Palte, especially at the beginning of their tenure. P4 relayed, “It was terrific the first year I was there. I mean, it was just really magical...It's a lot of work, but everybody was great. It was a pretty happy place to work.” Similarly, P6 reported, “Until we knew there was something wrong, I loved it.”

Surprise. Two of the study participants reported feelings of surprise. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of surprise such as relief, surrealism, distraction, disbelief, or amazement are categorized together. P2 worked at Palte during its early years as a software engineer. He stated that learning about the unethical activities at Palte was “absolutely unexpected.” He felt “relieved” to “not have any connection with what happened.” P4 described a sense of surreality while recounting his experiences more than a decade later, “I don't know what happened with everything. How could it have gone so sideways for her? She was really nice to everybody. She seemed very genuine to me. She seemed like she cared. It's kind of surreal. It's unbelievable.”

Trust. Just two of the participants reported feelings of trust. For the purposes of this study, dimensions of trust such as admiration, acceptance, relaxation, thankfulness, and pride are categorized together. Dimensions of trust were not found in the triangulation data sources.

P1 discussed a sense of camaraderie and trust amongst his team during a three-week period of working essentially non-stop, sleeping at the office, and even showering at a nearby gym. “When you're in a war, you're in a war together.” P6 also described the trust amongst his team that grew through the shared experience of accepting that their concerns were being ignored. “I think that's when we all decided, from our department, that we have to leave because none of us wanted to be connected to this type of...bad science. We [were] all looking for a new job.”

Theme 2: Workplace Conditions that Supported Corruption. There were several conditions that promoted, sustained, or failed to prevent corruption. These conditions were described by the participants and corroborated by triangulation data sources. These conditions are presented as subthemes. The sub-themes include (a) centralized power, (b) chaotic environment, (c) dismissal of concerns, (d) virtuous objective, (e) group identification, (f) employee turnover, (g) information control, and (h) excessive secrecy and security.

Centralized Power. When P7 was hired in 2010, he quickly learned that there was very little hierarchy within the company. He realized that Palte did not have a chief financial officer or typical leadership positions such as vice president of marketing or personnel. According to P7 there was little “middle management or any kind of management to speak of.” He continued, “no one reported to anybody.” In his opinion, this flat hierarchy was “a big part of the problem.” For example, despite working in R&D, P6’s entire team had one direct supervisor who reported directly to CL2.

Similar results were found in the triangulation data. For example, T11 testified that CL2 was “heavily involved” in daily lab management (Atkins, 2021e, para. 32). T11 attested that CL2 undermined his authority by firing a lab employee without discussing it with T11. T10 testified similarly, saying that CL1 and CL2 did not allow him the authority to perform his duties as lab director (Atkins, 2022a, para. 21). CL5 testified that CL1 was “very involved” in the details of marketing, communications, and investor pitches (Atkins, 2021i, para. 9). T4 stated bluntly, “They micromanaged everything in that company, like, everything” (Jarvis, 2021a, 30:09).

Other factors compounded improper governance. P7 assessed that CL1 and CL2 did not have the industrial expertise or management skills necessary to properly run Palte. “There was that big experience gap in not just their fields of expertise, but also in their management skills.”

Compounding that, the board of directors was ineffective and powerless. P7 observed, “it wasn't a board of directors, it was a fan club...they [did not] have the backgrounds to even know what kind of questions to ask.” P7 said succinctly, “They told her what she wanted to hear, and she believed it, you know, which is a really bad combination.” P7 also described CL1’ “100-to-1 voting rights” with each share of her stock. CL1 “could overrule the board at any time, so the board had no power.” This was confirmed by Carreyrou (2022):

In December 2013, she forced through a resolution that assigned one hundred votes to every share she owned, giving her 99.7 percent of the voting rights. From that point on, the Palte board couldn't even reach a quorum without [CL1]. (p. 298)

Chaotic “Startup” Environment. Employees commonly worked various jobs, performed duties outside of their skillset, and tolerated unusual working conditions because, they reasoned, Palte was a startup company. P6 commented, “everybody was wearing all kinds of different hats in their department, and sometimes you weren't doing just the first step. You were doing step one, two, three. It all depended on what the workload was.” P6 justified this saying it was “six months before that rollout was supposed to happen. Everybody was helping out to make that work.” P1, who worked in the human resources department in 2016–2017, digitized “real patient test results” from the Arizona labs for several weeks. He saw this in retrospect as “odd,” but at the time he saw it as supporting the startup attain its goal. P4 also played multiple roles, “there for a while...we were [CL1 and CL2's] assistants.”

P2 started at Palte in 2006, about 3 years after its inception. His direct supervisor managed two departments. He offered, “usually it's two separate managers.” But he justified it because of the company's startup status. Likewise, P6 worked at Palte from 2013–2015 but reported “they really didn't have official department names.” P4 “They were constantly looking

for money. [CL2] would come to me, ‘I want you to stop everything and just get, we need grant writers to write grants and get grant money.’ So...we'd suddenly start hiring grant writers. And then their assistants would quit, and we'd have to stop everything and get another personal assistant.”

The triangulation data showed similar experiences. According to a former lab director, “[Palte] looked like it was run by mad scientists... and even though the company was now about 10 years old, it still felt like a startup” (Jarvis, 2019a, 6:22). T1 recalled that employees “worked 12, sometimes 16 hours a day,” (Jarvis, 2019a, 6:15) and “would sleep in their cars” (Jarvis, 2021b, 13:43). CL2 drove teams to work “oppressive hours” through the night, as if it “was a badge of honor” (Atkins, 2021c, para. 5).

Leadership Ignored Concerns. Five of the seven participants reported that when they raised concerns, those concerns were ignored. Participant 3 directly reported to CL2. P3 identified risks with at least three situations that could harm patients. However, CL2 disregarded his reservations saying, “we got it under control” and “don’t you worry your little head about it, we’ll get this to work.” P5 described a meeting with CL1 in which he and members of his team challenged the rollout plan, warned of potential consequences, and suggested reasonable solutions. However, CL1 listened, did not ask questions, and “a couple days later, she came back, the same requirements, the same schedule.” P6 stated “sometimes it was [*sic*] actually problems you could easily fix, but nobody was listening.”

When T6 noted, “the laws of physics just are not going to permit us to [do this]” (Gibney, 2019, 49:44), leadership dismissed his objection, saying, “maybe you’re not a Silicon Valley person. You should go work for some other company...if you don’t believe in the vision of the product.” T14, an executive product designer at Palte said, “she did not want to hear other

people's opinions. She wanted positive results...anyone who basically told CL1 no, and disagreed with her perspective and point of view, you were immediately terminated" (Jarvis, 2019b, p. 23:18).

T3 testified despite emailing CL1 "detailing numerous failures...[CL1] directly pressured staff to make [a large, well-known company's] rollout happen anyway" (Jarvis, 2021b, 26:45). T3 also emailed CL1 and CL4, a vice president at Palte, flagging missing data (Atkins, 2021b, para. 13). T3's concerns were dismissed by those corporate leaders.

Former laboratory director T11 "repeatedly expressed serious concerns" to CL1 and CL2, but was "met with pushback," extreme irritation and frustration (Atkins, 2021e, para. 11). Likewise, former laboratory director T10 recommended suspending the use of Palte testing devices for patients until test results stabilized (Eslinger, 2022, para. 1). T10 testified that CL2 responded angrily, "that wouldn't happen" (para. 3).

Former laboratory assistant T1 testified that she explained that she brought her quality-control worries to multiple supervisors, including CL2, vice president CL4, and the company's medical directors (Atkins, 2021a, para. 12). However, they consistently dismissed what she reported. Likewise, T2 emailed the corporate leaders about his concerns with laboratory conditions and procedures after anonymously submitting his concerns with the New York State Department of Health (Jarvis, 2019a, 17:58). In response, CL2 demanded an apology and called T2's remarks "reckless," "insulting," and "based on 'absolute ignorance'" (19:28).

P4 spoke with his direct supervisor about his concerns, but she did not respond effectively. "She was just always trying to keep everything calm and [responded] just that things will work out." P4 recalled his frustration and that of his teammates when their suggestions for improvement were ignored, saying, "we were trying to make things better. And they didn't want

to do any of the [suggestions]. He continued, “nobody could change the path.” P7 was a direct supervisor and took a similar stance when his team expressed concerns about CL1 or CL2. P7’s advice to his team was “just nod and smile and, you know, she’ll forget about it. Just ignore them. Don’t get an argument with them.”

The Goal Was Virtuous and Achievable. Four of the participants volunteered their opinion that Palte’s vision is within reach. Participant 1 declared Palte was a “shining example of Silicon Valley doing good in the world.” P1 confidently stated “I do think that one day the vision [CL1] has will occur...If it didn’t take shortcuts, [Palte] would have succeeded.” P4 similarly offered, “if they had stayed quiet longer and made it work...if they took more time and let it work, it could have worked.” P6 also agreed, “I don’t think the science was actually that bad; if you would have just taken more time and developed it in the correct way.”

Palte’s vision of revolutionizing the method, speed, and cost of medical laboratory testing (United States v. *CL1, et al.*, 2019) was a virtuous one according to several participants and the triangulation data. Participant 4 said, “their goal was amazing” and that he was “excited” to “be part of something great.” Likewise, P1 was “excited” about Palte’s “noble goal” and “beautiful vision.” Participant 5 described the vision as “revolutionizing personalized medicine.” T2 thought, “[Palte] was changing the world” (Gibney, 2019, 1:23:41). He also recognized that he “wanted it so badly to be true” (1:24:25).

Group Identity Through the Mission. Participants reported that Palte’s mission was shared directly through CL1. Every employee was interviewed by CL1 and CL2. P5 recounted, “she interviewed everybody personally, and so, you got the vision through her.” P7 felt CL1’s description on the mission was “euphoric. It was like change the world and all this kind of stuff.”

According to P1, when an employee was hired, “you get this letter when you joined and it really excites you. The offer letter includes, like, a personal letter from [CL1].”

The all-hands meetings were also used to reinforce the corporation’s identity. P2, who worked at Palte in its early phase, until 2007, reported that company-wide “all-hands” meetings occurred every two weeks or so. During these meetings, P2 reflected that “99% of information the information provided” was in a “positive direction.” P3 whose tenure ran from 2007–2010, described these meetings as “utterly uninformative...pep rallies.” P6 stated, “That’s how these meetings were...They were always trying to manipulate everybody into thinking everybody is wrong and they are right, right?” P1, who worked at Palte from 2016–2017, said the meetings “started becoming less transparent” over time.

During two documented all-hands meetings, CL1 and CL2 used language to emphasize solidarity within the company against a common enemy. During a company-wide meeting after the investigative journalist, John Carreyrou, published his first *Wall Street Journal* article, CL1 and CL2 led chants of “f*#^ you, Carreyrou” (Jarvis, 2019a, 14:45). A nearly identical cry targeting one of Palte’s competitors occurred at a different all-hands meeting (Gibney, 2019, 1:40:25). The day after the resignations of two laboratory leaders, the CLs called an all-hands meeting, provided copies of Coelho’s *The Alchemist* to every employee, and conveyed to them that CL1 “was building a religion” and those who were not “prepared to show complete devotion and unmitigated loyalty” should leave (p. 172). Participant 1 embraced the idea saying, “it was us against the world.” He continued, “when you’re in a war, you’re in a war together.”

Evidence showed that Palte hired and retained employee who were likely to support the mission without question. T1 said, “the majority of the people that had actually worked with the technology tended to be recent graduates, tended to be people that didn’t have a lot of

experience” (Jarvis, 2019a, p. 6:04). P4, who worked within the human resources department, stated “They would hire people to go along with the results that they were looking to get...people who would go along with anything...be more willing to fudge things than people who, you know, have, you know, different sets of morals.” T4 also opined that:

They hired a lot of people who were extremely young, hadn't been in the industry a while, and were more willing to go along with things than...people who were willing to stand up and say, ‘you can't do this,’ or ‘you have to do this.’ And I think that became obvious.

P3 categorized employees into a few groups. He felt “50%” of employees were “true believers” who thought “she’s going to lead them to the promised land.” He continued, “There were very few of us that I will call ‘reasoned skeptics.’ And then there were a bunch of people who just wanted to get their paycheck and ‘leave me the hell alone’.” P4 felt CL1’s “inner circle” of managers “truly believed in what they were doing.” P6 said that for some employees:

It was like a religion or a cult. There were people who [pause] you could not argue with them. They would not believe you. They would always believe, you know, [CL2 or CL1].

P5 was adamant that CL1 did not consider herself to be dishonest. “She's a thousand percent. She believed everything she was saying. And you can see it because she still denies stuff that is blatantly obvious.” The triangulation data supports this. J1, a journalist who extensively interviewed CL1 for a cover article of a national magazine in December 2014 later said:

She was a zealot, and a zealot is such a believer, a true believer, in what they're doing that they're blind to the reality of what's happening. Not for a moment do I believe that she lies in bed at night and thinks, “I was a swindler. I was a crook. I lied.”

Turnover. Six of the seven participants discussed a high rate of turnover for Palte. Attrition occurred for two primary reasons: voluntary resignation and involuntary termination. P4, who worked in the human resources department said:

The turnover really started amping up...It was always like being on a hamster wheel...we'd hire somebody, they'd last for a few weeks and they'd be gone, or a few months and they'd be gone. People would quit...People were kind of just understanding that it wasn't real and were leaving.

P6 reported, "People were saying stuff and they get fired... They just kept the people [who]...were covering up. And they fired the people who were resisting going along with that vision." P7 described a distressing situation when a colleague who "couldn't keep his mouth shut" was fired suddenly by CL2. P1 downplayed the turnover. "It was probably, like, 20%, but given the noise around the company, it was to be expected. I think it was just slightly higher than...a [non-startup] tech company at that time."

Control of Information. Five of the seven participants discussed information siloing, with three stating it was a deliberate tactic to compartmentalize information within the company. While P6 was never explicitly instructed, "you cannot talk to this person or that person. I know it existed." However, he acknowledged that personnel working in other departments "didn't really know what was going on. But the moment you got...into the validation [department] and you were exposed to the machine...that was the moment when we all found out that there was something wrong." P3 felt the information compartmentalization was "absolutely" done to keep employees from knowing about problems with the technology.

When asked about the leadership's intention for information siloing, P3 stated, "It was done with complete malice. There's no doubt in my mind." P7 said it was "absolutely" a tactic to

“deliberately hide” information. P7 believed corporate leaders were “afraid” that “if [employees] talk too much, they’ll start questioning what’s going on.” He continued, “they did not want to have to explain anything to anybody.” P4 stated unequivocally that leadership “absolutely” compartmentalized information to maintain “control and secrecy” over information. P4 described compartmentalization increasing over his tenure from 2012–2014:

It used to be wide open and now, and then it became, over time...They put all the software people in their own area. The lab people were in their own area. The admin people were in their own area...It was very segmented so that people couldn't see what was going on.

Examples of information siloing were found in the triangulation data sources as well. T1 stated, “it was just sort of instilled in us in our onboarding...they would barricade certain portions of the lab” . T1 testified that CL2 had directed her via email not to share “quality control issues with other teams” (Atkins, 2021a, para. 12). CL5, a senior project manager and member of the extended corporate leadership testified that CL1 and CL2 instructed him and others “not to share information between teams”(Atkins, 2021h, para. 16). CL5 added that only CL1 and CL2 knew all the details about “what was going on at the company.” T3 testified about Palte’s “policy of siloing information and prohibiting teams from sharing their project data with others at the company” (Atkins, 2021b, para. 10). T9 shared his similar experience:

We became much more siloed. Walking down the hallway, you'd say hi, and the person would look at the ceiling or the floor or anything to avoid eye contact and not acknowledge you back. Then the next person and the next person, and then you'd notice, there'd be whole groups that just wouldn't...you were invisible to them.

It was very hard to communicate information sometimes because there were so many blockades and silos and this emphasis on secrecy. If the people from the chemistry team could talk about what was coming next from the engineering team, they would've said, "well, that's not going to solve the problem," but since everyone was working on it separately, they could all keep working forever without actually solving anything (Gibney, 2019, 57:39).

The participants had varying opinions on the success of information control within the company. P1 laughed lightly as he recounted, "people knew everything that was going on." Likewise, P4 said workplace friendships prevailed. "I would sit at lunch...they would be telling me what was going on. And we'd all just be shaking our heads and like, you knew it wasn't working." He stated, "I knew it was all fake 'cause, you'd heard things internally that it wasn't working." T2 acknowledged that colleagues sometimes joked about the inaccuracy of Palte testing, but more often "everyone was concerned that we weren't giving patients the right results" (Jarvis, 2019a, 15:32).

Despite working in the validation department, P6 was unaware that Palte was utilizing modified, commercially available blood testing equipment. "We did not know that at that time because we were never exposed to the department." T13, a phlebotomist trainer at Palte "didn't know that Siemens [testing machines] were being used until after the [Wall Street Journal] article hit" (Gibney, 2019, 1:41:37). P2 opined that "maybe" some of the corporate leadership team "knew most of details." However, he was confident that most employees "didn't know all these details." P3 worked within the R&D department but "we weren't allowed to talk to anybody in the labs." Without evidence to the contrary, he felt optimistic that his colleagues were making good progress on their components of the technology.

Excessive Secrecy and Security. Secrecy and security measures at Palte were excessive according to the participants and the triangulation sources. P1 described Palte as “shrouded in secrecy.” Compared to his previous experiences at firms working on “very top-secret projects,” P1 “was taken off guard” with the high level of security within the building. Likewise, P4 affirmed, “I’ve never seen that kind of thing before.” According to P1, the level of security inside and outside the building was “odd.” CL1 and CL2 were driven in a “little caravan, like a presidential envoy.” P7 described shifts of six armed guards within the building that monitored CL1 and CL2’s movement with the code names, Eagle One and Eagle Two, respectively. This information was echoed by T12, a facilities coordinator at Palte (Gibney, 2019, p. 56:03).

T4 reported a degree of “paranoia and secrecy” that was “well beyond” any normal level (Gibney, 2019, 55:48). Likewise, T5 said, “obviously, they didn’t want anybody to actually see what was going on in there” (47:52). According to P3, “every email was checked. Every outgoing e-mail, it was like living in the Gestapo”. P4 recalled the head of human resources “would grumble about why she had to let people go ‘that they just couldn’t keep their mouths shut about things.’” P4 also recalled how communications changed over his tenure. “You couldn’t go talk to people like you used to.”

There were also unusual levels of legal activity. P4 recalled, “they had rooms of lawyers. They had more lawyers than they had, like, quality assurance people.” P1 reflected similarly, “They spent like \$8 million a month on legal fees...Compared to a company like Google, Google doesn’t spend that in a month. May not spend that in a year.”

Employees were made aware of the seriousness of secrecy from the very beginning of their employment. P4 explained that during the hiring process, Palte ensured employees were “very aware that they would sue and go after them, like, to keep people in line.” He continued

saying, “they were very upfront with letting you know that you could be terminated. That you were an at-will employee and could be let go at any time.” P3 recalled, “we were told to never speak of the company. If we went out to lunch, we were not allowed to speak of the company.” T6 questioned the onerous documentation new employees had to agree to “saying you can't speak poorly about the company. You're legally liable for any detriment caused to the company. It's like, who's writing these contracts and what are they trying to hide?”

T4 stated, “the paranoia seemed to come from the belief that someone's going to beat us to it, or someone's going to steal our ideas, or we're not going to get the whole market” (Gibney, 2019, 55:30). With hindsight, knowing that CL1 was relying on altering commercially available blood testing equipment, rather than viable new technology, P5 posited this as the reason why secrecy was “so important” to CL1:

She knew she didn't have any of the really super-secret sauce that she could rely on. She was very sensitive about, you know, that's why everything was so hush hush. Because she was concerned that if somebody figured out what she was trying to do and that she didn't have any secret sauce to do that, then it was equally easy for them to replicate what was going on.

Theme 3: Justifications for Participant’s Thoughts, Opinions, and Actions in the Workplace. The participants reported a wide range of explanations for their thoughts, opinions, and actions surrounding ethically questionable activities. This section begins with examples of several ethically questionable activities occurring during the tenure of the participants. The theme continues by categorizing the explanations into several sub-themes, including (a) potential retribution, (b) financial opportunities, (c) dismissal of complaints, (d) known investor risk, (e) locus of responsibility, (f) normal startup activities, and (g) supporting the goal.

P4 recalled a situation he felt was improper. “They didn't have anybody doing the quality assurance work... They were saying that because they're a device company, they didn't have to do the clinical work. But it didn't sound right to me.” P7 knew the advertising and testing “was dishonest” because “most of the time they're having to take vials of blood” instead of a single drop. Moreover, Palte performed central lab testing “using Siemens equipment” instead of Palte’s proprietary equipment despite not having “any experience” to do so.

P6 stated, “All they wanted... was [FDA] approval for these tests. And it didn't matter if they were right or wrong. You are running out of time, and you have already these agreements with [a large well-known company]... and *it just had to work.*” P6 knew validation tests were being changed:

We had a lot of instances where we thought [a test] was not successful, and we heard the next day it was successful... So between our measurement, the deposition of the data, the analysis of the data, and the official report of the data, there's something happened in between.

The participants described their perceptions of and association with unethical activities at Palte. P1 acknowledged, “it was a misrepresentation, looking back.” But P1 quickly added, “at the same time, in startups, you start with, you just have a vision of the future... You talk as if you’re going to do it. It happens all the time in tech and startups.” P1 vigorously defended his direct supervisor and Palte when he described working essentially non-stop for three weeks, sleeping at the office, and even showering at a nearby gym. He justified this saying, “this happens with all startups... Like, okay, this is what's required for us right now.”

P1 denied supporting any improper activities, “I didn’t do anything unethical during that time.” He continued, “It wasn't until I did that [data entry] exercise... that's when I started to

realize that, that, that, that's where you're putting people's lives over us." P1 defended his actions, "I sleep well at night...Honestly, like, [our department] didn't do anything wrong...we didn't cut corners."

P6 explained, "It's not fraud at [our] level, but it's just bad science and nobody of us wanted to be connected to that bad science. Even though, I mean, we didn't raise money. We had nothing to do with the business." P5 reflected, "You know, the good news is we were only doing internal testing, so we weren't harming anything, right? P7 clarified that he did not feel he ever supported unethical activities. "Well, I was never put in a position where I had to talk to investors or customers. So, no, I don't think so." P3 reasoned:

At the time, I knew that this was a company that was not playing on the up and up...I didn't realize they were going to be a cheating and fraud [*sic*] and stealing. I just thought they were going to, kind of, fake the science for a while, but I didn't think they were going to actually steal the money.

Potential Retribution. All participants voiced concerns about backlash as the primary reason they did not ardently vocalize concerns. P1 said speaking to me was the first time he had spoken about his experiences to anyone, saying, "you don't bite the hand that feeds you." P2 supposed that employees feared losing their jobs in a "job market was not good at all." P3 said his coworkers "were very, very, very circumspect about criticism (pause) and circumspect about saying anything." P3 continued that this was due to "fear...of losing their job."

Despite having "great working relationships" with several colleagues, after P5 left Palte, his coworkers "went radio silent." He described "a look of terror" a former colleague had when he happened to see him at a local store. Later he learned that "they were told if they talk to me at all, you will be walking out the door, you will be fired." Similarly, P6 described the guidance he

received. “Every manager was just telling you, ‘Don't suggest anything because the only thing which is going to happen is you get fired.’ And the few people in our department who actually said something, yeah, they did get fired.” P7 reported, “you don't want to cross the wrong people... You know, you just look at her crossways and she'd fire you.” T2 echoed the participants’ reports:

If you speak up, then you’re on their radar. You don’t want to be on their radar... That was the culture. People knew; they would say, “Oh, don’t speak up or, you know, you’d get fired. There was definitely a culture of fear (Jarvis, 2019a, 16:58).

Legal repercussions were another primary concern. P7 said simply, “they’re so litigious.” P5 was sued by Palte after he left the company along with two of his colleagues. “She did this for a number of people. Her goal is just to shut it all down through litigation.”

T6 corroborated the participants accounts, describing the agreements new employees signed as “a giant stack of paperwork saying you can't speak poorly about the company, you're legally liable for any detriment caused to the company” (Gibney, 2019, 57:17). P4 reported that the corporate leadership was “very threatening” and “real serious about everybody keeping quiet.” P4 contemplated:

I guess I could have gone public and said more, but...I don't wanna get sued or pay a huge lawsuit or anything...who's gonna do that? Why am I gonna stick my neck out and get sued? 'Cause I don't have deep pockets to deal with [defending myself].

Financial Opportunity. Five of the seven participants discussed financial motivations as justification for not reporting concerns. P7 said “golden handcuffs” were “part of the problem. The phrase describes the potential loss of financial rewards such as stock options or other incentives designed to retain employees. P7 mused:

You keep thinking to yourself, “Am I gonna walk away from that?” ...This is going to pay off one way or another. Some dumb other company will buy this company at some ridiculous valuation, and I'll walk away with the money. So, I'll just hang in there.

P6 opined, “you're living in California from paycheck to paycheck and you're having to make a living.” He suggested, “a lot of [long-term employees] were just hoping, ‘Wow, maybe I can get rich. I will just sit it out here, and we just fake it until we make it.’” P2 thought, “money, money, money, money” motivated CL1 because, “she wanted to grow up this business.” P2 continued, “she needed to show results, positive results to investors, first of all.” As a part of HR, P1 was aware that the last “general counsel was the highest paid person in the company. Got paid \$2 million a year...He didn’t care for stock, just wanted straight cash.” P3 reflected that one of his colleagues was morally conflicted but needed to wait for his stock to vest. P3 said, “all [he] wanted was to get his stock and get the hell out.” P5 explained:

You can easily see where money starts becoming an issue. And so, the next thing you know...you know, you got to tell a story to make to get your money, right? And so, you got to hit certain milestones, or you got to at least convince people that you're going to be very close to hitting those milestones. And I'm sure that was going on in the back of her mind.

Dismissal of Complaints. Another common justification, reported by four of the participants, was that employees felt unheard when they raised concerns. P3 recalled that his misgivings were often disregarded, “they would not hear it.” P4 stated, “nobody could, could change the path they were going.” P5 recalled telling CL1, “‘we need to hit the reset button on this and rethink this through.’...A couple days later, she came back, the same requirements, the same schedule.” P6 described his team’s frustration, “sometimes it was [*sic*] actually problems

you could easily fix, but nobody was listening. There was never any, I would say, any appreciation for your scientific knowledge or ideas at that point...there was no creativity and motivation of implementing suggestions.”

Known Risk of Investing. Two participants downplayed the harm the investors experienced from the fraud. P1 said, “investors know the risk, right? Venture capital is a very risky game.” P4 felt similarly. “In the end, the only people that were really hurt by it were just the people who invested the money. And they were people who had a lot of money to invest. So, you know, they took a risk.”

Locus of Responsibility. A few participants reported that exposing misgivings was someone else’s responsibility. P1 emphasized, “it was ahead of my pay grade.” P6 felt his expertise was not utilized and that he was not asked directly about his concerns. “I would have told them, but they never asked me. They asked maybe the manager, [but] they hired *me* for this expertise. Why are they not asking me, right?”

P7 assumed the proper controls were in place through “the FDA” or “self-certification.” As a last resort presumed that a doctor would question aberrant results. “I assume that you get a blood test that's on a doctor's orders. He gets the results, he looks at them and he says, ‘Let's do that one again.’” P7 also believed the board of directors was responsible. “When you're on a board, [if] you see something, either from a business standpoint or a fiduciary standpoint, that's not right, you speak up!”

Normal for a Startup. P1 acknowledged that there were “misrepresentations” in hindsight. However, he defended Palte emphasizing “this happens all the time in startups...there's a lot of like over promising, under delivering when it comes to startups.” P1 continued, “a lot of companies do this. They have their rosy projections. I wouldn't say that's

fraud. It's like, those are goals.” While explaining the motivation for working almost continually for 3-weeks at the office, P1 said, “this happens with all startups. This is like, ‘okay, this is what's required for us right now.’ And it's just hunkered down into the work. It sounds weird, but it's actually, it's more common than you think.”

According to P4, new employees had “to take a leap of faith to come join us, because we can't really go into the science we're working on. We couldn't have job postings that told them about what we were doing.” P4 defended the leaders’ decision-making this way, “I think they definitely tried to hide how things were running...And I guess they have every right to.” P5 recognized that while the company may have been an “extreme version,” he reasoned that the anomalies “could have been normal stealth mode startup” types of occurrences.

Supporting the Goal. P1 emphasized “science is slow” on the way to “this beautiful vision of the future we're trying to all work towards.” He continued, “it doesn't always happen in the timeframe that you give investors. So maybe there are some shortcuts that are made along the way.” P3 affirmed “they'd fake the science for a little while...The key was, if they ever got the technology to work, the science would work.” P6 rationalized “There were some tests developed which actually *did* work. And they were rolling out mostly those [simpler] tests in the beginning, which, you know, felt like, okay, we still have some time to fix the other ones.”

Other Explanations. There were several other explanations that do not align with the sub-theme discussed above. However, they were important to include. For example, two participants reported that they went along with the crowd in certain circumstances. P1 made sense of his willingness to stay at the office continuously for 3-weeks saying, “When you're in a war, you're in a war together...like, you're not gonna leave your [pause] everyone will feel bad if

you left.” P6 “Everybody was looking for a new job. And everybody was just collecting the paycheck until they knew they can afford leaving.”

Apathy may have been a factor as well, P6 opined, “There's a lot of employees who just don't care, right? They want to do their job, and they don't care about the rest of the world.” P4 considered voicing his concerns more forcefully but was concerned he would not be taken seriously:

Who am I gonna tell and who's even gonna believe me?” He went on to say that he considered his actions in the years since he left the firm. “And I thought about it in the past too, like if I had said something, but again, I don't know who would've believed me if I had told them. 'Cause again, I'm not like, I was, I'm like mid-level manager and I'm not a scientist.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was “How do the lived experiences of employees in the United States reflect the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations?” Participants reported a plethora of experiences. Using coding and thematic analysis within the NVivo qualitative data analysis platform (Lumivero, 2024), two themes were identified: experiences related to corporate leadership and experiences related to direct supervisors. Results varied across corporate leadership and comprised three sub-themes related to IL according to the role: (a) the chief executive officer (CL1) (b) the chief operating officer (CL2), and (c) the extended corporate leadership team. Experiences related to direct supervisors comprised eight sub-themes related to identification with direct supervision and shared social identification: (a) champion for the team, (b) connection, (c) cohesiveness, (d)

leadership ability, (e) team representation, (f) team protection, (g) similar values, and (h) structure for success.

Theme 1: Experiences Related to Corporate Leadership. Three participants reported overall positive experiences with CL1. P6 described CL1 during his employment interview. “She did talk to everybody in person. And it was really nice. And I cannot really say anything negative about her as a person.” P1 did not have a close relationship with CL1 but thought highly of her. He stated “[CL1] was a very charismatic leader.” P4 had a close working relationship with CL1, especially during the early part of his tenure, and P4 praised CL1. “She was great...a very, very nice, really, really caring, nice person.” P4 continued effusive praise, saying, “she was really nice to everybody...seemed very genuine to me. And she seemed like she cared.”

Other participants relayed more neutral opinions of CL1. According to P2, CL1 “kept a distance from everyone, all engineers.” However, P2 said “she was very friendly” when she engaged in small talk. P5 depicted CL1 as “fairly reserved.” However, “she was very involved in the day-to-day stuff...and how the results were coming out of the lab.” He described her ability to obtain high-profile, wealthy donors. “Her story's compelling. She's a young female, drop out from Stanford, and you know, they drank the Kool-Aid as much as everybody else.” P5 explained that CL1 was a “narcissist” who could build “connections” by being “good at playing the game”:

I think just she's super smart, and she's very charismatic...she knows how to keep her cards close to the vest, but yet still go out there and charm these people to the point where you get millions of dollars, and tens of millions, or hundreds of millions of dollars out of them. It's pretty impressive. You got to know it's impressive.

Still other participants spoke negatively about CL1. P7 was candid about his opinion of CL1, saying “I thought [she] was delusional. I really did. I thought she was delusional.” Beyond that, P7 said CL1 did not have “any kind of management experience,” “she didn’t trust anybody,” and “was totally ignorant” on many scientific topics. P7 described CL1 as “a salesman.” CL1 was “a good talker” who “could talk about something and sound like she knew what she was talking about; when she didn't know absolutely anything about what she's talking about.”

P3 complained that CL1 took credit for patents “she didn’t even understand.” Saying, “She did nothing. Just come off it; don’t you dare. So, when she talks about all the patents she’s had? Please.” P3 described CL1s as “just power mad” and “a megalomaniac.” He continued saying, “This was her dream, and she's going to take us all to the promised plan. And she's the gift from God...such arrogance, that’s this Messiah complex she had...She was going to lead us to the golden arches of heaven.”

P1 continues to have a “sympathetic view” of Palte and CL1. P1 felt CL1 was treated unfairly stating, “I think if she wasn't a woman, she would have wouldn't have had such a hard fall.” He emphasized, “She went to jail for misrepresentations, and I think that was wrong. If you were getting put her into jail for something, it [should] be for putting patients' lives at risk. That's not why she went to jail though.” Speaking about CL1’s punishment, P4 was conflicted, “I just don't see how she got [pause]. I don't think she was deserving. I feel bad for her, because [pause]. But I don't know. She did it to herself, I guess.”

Speaking about the outcome of CL1’s criminal trial, P5 was grateful that she was found guilty. CL1 had “finally been held accountable for this stuff, and in some regards, T7's wife got some justice.” Despite his overall negative descriptions of CL1, P7 wrote to the judge prior to

her sentencing arguing for a light punishment. P7 reasoned the board of directors did not provide proper guidance:

She got no pushback from [the board]. She's 19 years old when she started this thing.

People [were] saying she was the next Steve Jobs, and the genius, and all this stuff. And she wasn't a genius. She wasn't a Steve Jobs. And, you know, she was naïve enough to believe it. And they kept egging her on.

The triangulation data sources also reflected mixed opinions of CL1. Originally, T1 “was completely infatuated about this amazing female entrepreneur who had dropped out of Stanford and started her own company” (Jarvis, 2021b, 11:01). T1 testified about CL1, saying “she had a charisma to her. She had a strong sense of conviction about her mission” (Baron, 2021, para. 4). Later T1 said, “I couldn't understand how someone could continuously lie. It really changed my perception of her” (Gibney, 2019, 1:22:23). T2 reported, “I really liked [CL1]” (Jarvis, 2019a, 18:47). However, T2 emphasized, “she’s really good at telling you what you need to hear to keep going” (Jarvis, 2019a, 14:15). T15 explained, “If you really want to believe something, you will do all the necessary gymnastics you need to in order to believe it. And I kind of feel that that’s completely apropos of [CL1]” (39:42).

P4 had a close working relationship with CL1 and CL2 for the first year of his employment. Speaking about them together, P4 said, “I loved [CL1]. She was really great to me. So was [CL2]. I really enjoyed talking to both of them...They were really sweet. They took care of us.” P4 explained that “they were very convincing...I believed in CL1 and CL2, but I also believed in what their goal was.” When speaking about CL1 and CL2, P6 recalled, “It’s true that they, especially [CL1] has this gift of convincing people everything’s all great and perfect.”

However, the relationship between P4, CL1, and CL2 soured as Palte's reputation grew. P4 stated, "They got kind of headstrong...their egos ballooned." P4's feelings were hurt when the corporate leads' demeanor changed. The leaders became "distant." P4 tried to make sense of his experiences, contemplating, "I don't know what happened with everything...How could it have gone so sideways?"

CL2 was described by P4 as "kind of bristly...nobody would say he's nice...he always kind of had a sour look on his face. He would bark at people...he was demanding." P4 emphasized that CL2 was "fair" and "always nice to me." P4 acknowledged that "people would complain about him" because he was "honest" and "said what was on his mind."

P7 reported directly to CL2 and "had no trouble with him." P7 felt CL2 had "respect" for P7 and "never pushed back on anything." P7 highlighted that CL2 "had never been a manager," therefore, meetings were "very informal." "There was no budgeting system or [coefficient of variance]" to report and "[CL2] never asked." When CL2 became "heavy handed" by demanding his teams work "12 hours a day, six days a week," P7 "would ignore him." P7 felt CL2 may have misguided CL1 on operationalizing her vision, saying "I think [CL2] is probably the guy that talked her into this retail thing...He was sitting on, you know, three or four hundred million dollars. So, he had nothing to worry about. Looking back, that was a mistake."

P3 called CL2 "a piece of work" and described a few negative experiences with CL2. In one example "[CL2] came in one morning. He's holding a book; he's shaking the book in our face. He goes, 'I sat up all last night and I read this book...and I now know everything you do'." P3 claimed that intimidation was CL2's "management style." According to P3, CL2 "insulted my intellect and tried to physically intimidate me" despite being physically smaller in stature.

When P3 resigned, CL2 tried to refuse, prompting P3 to ask CL2, “what makes you think you’ve got a choice?”

Former lab director, T10, testified that CL2 “had a temper that was easily sparked during disagreements with others at the company” (Eslinger REF, March 30, 2022, para. 7). When T1 reported her concerns about test result quality to CL2, he snapped, “You need to sit down and keep your mouth shut...you don’t know what you’re talking about” (Jarvis, 2019a, 17:25). T1 reported that “People were very scared of upsetting CL1 and upsetting CL2...People were blatantly saying that they were scared of losing their jobs” (Jarvis, 2019a, 7:12).

Five participants briefly spoke about the extended corporate leadership. P7 discussed his fondness for CL3, a member of the “inner circle.” P7 felt connected to CL3, who was CL1’s brother. P7 “felt sorry for him” for “being in his sister’s shadow.” P7 said, “CL3 was a nice guy...wasn’t pretentious, and “would never fire anybody.” P4 spoke highly of the extended corporate leadership team as well. “Their core group...they were always with her. And they were always real fun. Like, I like those guys a lot...They were a really good group.”

Three participants spoke about unethical activities within the entire corporate leadership team. P1 reported, “It was a small group of people that...really close to [CL1], who decided to go public or make big tech shortcuts.” Similarly, P2 surmised, “I don’t know how many people were involved in [unethical activities] ...Some of top management knew at least partially about what was going on.” P3 renounced CL4, declaring “I was so bitterly disappointed with [CL4]. Once I left, he lost his moral compass.”

Theme 2: Dimensions of Identification with Workplace Leaders. The results related to direct supervisors (DS) comprised eight sub-themes. These sub-themes related to identification with leadership and shared social identification. The themes are (a) champion for

the team, (b) connection, (c) cohesiveness, (d) leadership ability, (e) team representation, (f) team protection, (g) similar values, and (h) structure for success.

Champion for the Team. The participants reported varying perspectives when asked if their DS was a champion for their team. P2 responded, “not really.” P4’s DS also was not a champion for the team. P4 recalled, “if you wanted something, you'd have to really argue for it...she didn't champion this...And [P4’s DS] was the kind of person that if [CL2] and [CL1] said no, that was it.”

P6 felt his first DS was a champion for his team. Upon his recommendation for updates to the laboratory, “within six months, they bought all of the equipment. And they had me build this entire new lab and train everyone on these new technologies. So, they were actually pretty open to [improvements] if it helps moving forward.” P5 described his DS as a champion for the team when his team by providing “whatever was needed,” such as “laboratory equipment.” It is important to highlight that P5’s DS was as a corporate lead, in this case, CL1.

Connection. The participants reported a spectrum of responses regarding the connection they felt with their direct supervisors. P2 reported that he his relationship to his DS “was not a very close connection.” He concluded that this was because “about 15 people” reported to the DS, indicating that the team was large. P5 also did not feel connected to his DS, CL1. P5 stated, “No...she had that air about her that, you know, basically everything's fairly secretive about who, what, and why she is who she is...She just never gave that information up, and I never really bothered to ask for it.” P6 had two DSs during his employment with Palte. P6 did not feel connected to his second DS, saying his DS did not want “outside work friendship” or “doing anything with [the team] after the work hours.”

P6 felt connected to his first DS, saying they were “pretty good friends” adding he had “met her husband.” P1 felt a strong connection to this DS. “Yeah, I had a great relationship with my manager...We were very close...Sometimes she felt like she wasn't the manager. I felt like I was talking to my older sister or friend.”

Cohesiveness. Most participants felt their teams were cohesive, however they had varying reports about their DS’s impact on creating that cohesiveness. P2 was the only participant that reported his team was not cohesive and his DS did not attempt to create cohesiveness. When asked if P5 felt like he had a cohesive team, he responded “very much so.” However, his DS did not drive this cohesiveness. “We always had a good time. We would go out for beers...normal things...but she would never participate.” P6 felt similarly. P6 affirmed that he was part of “a pretty cohesive team.” However, P6’s DS did not influence this, saying his DS “was less hands on.” P6 was “left alone, by myself, a little bit more. But I also never really had a bad experience.”

P1 reported that his DS “set the tone” for his highly cohesive team, noting, “she opened up her house several times to the whole family, to the whole company, to the whole team.” He continued, “She created a, like, psychologically safe place. I felt like I could be myself. I felt that I was part of a team. I felt like the team cared for me.”

Neither P3 nor P7 felt their DSs contributed to their team’s cohesiveness. It’s important to point out that both P3 and P7 reported to CL1 and CL2, respectively. P3 and P7 were the DSs of their teams. P3 stated, “we all worked very closely together.” P3 also explained that his team’s cohesiveness led him to stay at Palte for as long as he did, saying, “but remember, I was only there three years.” P7 said, “that's how you build a team. That's how you build camaraderie. You stand up for each other. You back each other.”

Leadership Ability. The participants reported myriad views on their DS's leadership ability. P1 praised his DS's leadership abilities. "With everything, like she was a good leader." He noted that his DS "did more than her fair share" and "handled tough questions as much as she could" during the company-wide town hall meetings. P6 described his first DS as "a pretty good boss." P6 continued, "She was very calm. You know, I've never seen her freak out or yell at anyone. She was well organized."

P2 was neutral on his DS's leadership ability. He described his DS's focus on day-to-day task completion. P2's DS "was not looking, for the future, like [for] what needs to be changed tomorrow or in a week from today; what we need to do...to improve in one area or another area." P4 was somewhat frustrated with his DS's lack of process. When he asked for a standard performance review. "She would delay things.... They didn't have; we didn't have reviews." P7 spoke about his DS, CL2 as an incompetent leader, saying he had "never been a manager...there was no management structure whatsoever." P7 believed he demonstrated good leadership ability for his team when his DS did not. "I'm a hands-on guy. And like I say, these are mostly really young people.... And [I] taught them a lot, built up their confidence. I didn't look over the shoulder, but I let them make mistakes. So. I've always been a good developer of people and I'm still in touch with most of them."

Leadership as One of the Team. Participants reported a spectrum of description about their DSs being one of the team. P1 felt strongly that his DS was one of the team, saying "We were very close." He praised her, saying, "she opened up her house several times to the whole family, to the whole company, to the whole team." P4 also described his DS as one of the team because he believed she experienced the same stress the rest of the team did. "I think she was under stress, too, to try to meet the numbers."

In contrast, P2 did not feel his DS was one of the team, stating “He kept the distance.” P5 felt similarly about his DS since “she was fairly reserved the whole time.” P5 relayed an instance when he brought his team together with CL1, who was P5’s DS, to discuss concerns and offer solutions. She did not engage as a teammate would. P5 stated “I would have expected a lot more feedback, and none of it came in that meeting. [I don’t think] she even talked at all. She basically just listened and then spit out the same stuff a couple days later.” P7 did not describe his DS (CL2) as one of the team. However, in his own role as a DS, P7 referred to his team as “my guys,” verbally demonstrating that he considered himself to be one of the team.

Team Protection. Like other sub-themes in this section, there were myriad results from participants. P1 explained that his DS was a protector of his team. “[Direct supervisor] did shield a lot, took a lot of the heat...from [pause] [CL1].” P6 also described his first DS as a team protector. He said “of course” there was “pressure of, like, we need to get this done, and we need to get that done.” He acknowledged he “could feel [the pressure] every now and then...but I think she handled it in a good way.”

P7 felt his DS was not a protector, saying “[CL2 and CL1] weren't employee-oriented, and there was no, there was no management tiers [*sic*] between them and the people down below to protect them.” Instead, as a DS himself, P7 played the role of protector for his team. For example, when CL2 stipulated that all teams work 12 hour days, six days per week, P7 told his team, “You be here, get the job done. I don't care if you're here three hours a day. Just get your stuff done. So, I really backed them.” When his team complained about the corporate leadership, P7, he tried to protect his team from ramifications by reminding them to stay focused:

I said, “Don't worry about those people...We've got, we've got our job to do...just ignore [CL1] ...Just nod and smile and, you know, and she'll forget about it...Don't get into an

argument with them.” I said, “Well, just keep our heads down and keep busy.” You know, “don't push back.” Just, you know, say “yes or whatever. And don't argue” ...Because above me, there was nobody.

Similar Values. Again, participants' reports about their DS's value alignment were dichotomous. P4 felt his values aligned with those of his DS. P4 described some of their personal similarities and his DS's fair treatment of the team while having high expectations. P1 described similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds that he shared with his DS which increased their shared values, “And so we had a very close, like, bond.” P6 also felt his values aligned with those of his first DS. “She had the same values...She was a good scientist and she was...on the same page we all were, trying to, you know, get the best work done and make things happen for the group and also for the company.”

Conversely, P6's values did not align with his second DS, stating that “he had a more direct connection to the leadership...I always thought it was actually his intention to climb up the career ladder within [Palte]. And he tried whatever he could do to make that happen. And that was sometimes not a good thing. When asked if he and his DS shared similar values, P7 answered the question bluntly. “No, I didn't. I thought [CL1] was delusional. I really did. I thought she was delusional.” P2 did not share similar values with his DS. P2 stated, “He was not, like, a very open-minded person. His personality is not, like, open to everyone.”

Structure for Success. There were only two participants' results for this category, but they are noteworthy. Speaking about monthly team goals, P4's DS did not create a structure for success. P4 affirmed that even “if we really worked hard enough,” the goals were “impossible.” P6 described how corporate leads unethically created a structure for success by “promot[ing] people internally...to those positions where [corporate leadership] needed to influence them.” P6

said his DS was an example of someone assigned to such a position. P6 emphasized, “especially that guy, who was very loyal to [CL2]. He was very close to [CL2]. He was very loyal to them.” P6 continued describing the misalignment of his DS’s values compared to his own. “[DS] was easily influenceable. That’s what I would say... [DS believed] the typical Silicon Valley statement, ‘fake it until you make it.’... We can lie now and fix it later. But that never happened.”

Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

Using coding and thematic analysis with NVivo (Lumivero, 2024), three themes were found for RQ1 and two were identified for RQ2. The themes for RQ1 were range of emotions in the workplace, workplace conditions that supported corruption, and justifications for participant’s thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace. Themes for RQ2 were experiences related to corporate leadership and experiences related to direct supervisors.

This section of chapter four compares the findings and themes for alignment and consistency against the theoretical frameworks of Haslam et al.’s (2019) DAMILEF and phenomenology as well as established theories of the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007), ethical decision-making (Rest, 1994), mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996), leader-member exchange (LMX) (Graen & Schiemann, 1978), social identity theory (SIT) and social categorization theory (SCT) (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014).

Research Question 1: What Are the Lived Experiences of Employees Within the United States Who Support Unethical Activities in Biomedical Corporations?

The results showed that participants experienced a wide range of emotions during their employment at Palte. Experiences related to negative emotions of anger, fear, sadness, and disgust were reported nearly four times as often as positive emotions of happiness, anticipation, surprise, and trust. These findings align with negative impacts that have been reported in the

literature. These extant findings include cognitive dissonance (Yang et al., 2022), decreased job satisfaction, and increased stress (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Ogunfowora et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Palte employees also reported decreased organizational citizenship behavior and productivity along with increased turnover which align with Almeida et al.'s (2021) research.

According to the toxic triangle theory, there are three parts to a toxic organization: destructive leadership (DL), susceptible followers (SFs), and a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007). Shaw et al. (2011) described four personality-related attributes of DL: (a) tyrannical behavior, such as arrogance, obstinance, and meanness; (b) laziness or incompetence; (c) high emotionality, including compulsivity and lack of self-control; and (d) carelessness or emotionally unintelligent interactions in the workplace. Participants described all four of these components of DL.

Aumentado et al. (2024) found that employees who tolerated corrupt leadership did so because they either benefited from the corruption, feared retaliation, felt powerless, or were ambivalent. Padilla and colleagues (2007) defined two types of SFs based on their motivation: colluders and conformers. The results showed conformers, who fear their DL and comply with them to avoid the consequences of not doing so, were prevalent at Palte. Thirdly, the results of this study solidly align with Padilla et al.'s (2007) description of the four elements that contribute to environments where DL can thrive: "instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and the absence of checks and balances" (p. 185).

Researchers most commonly adopt cognitive theories to investigate ethical behavior and have found that affect and cognition are the two essential components that influence ethical (and unethical) behavior in the workplace (He et al., 2023). Rest (1994) defined four components necessary for ethical decision making: moral sensitivity (recognition), moral judgment, moral

motivation, and moral character. Rest's four-component theory emphasized a person's ability to recognize that a situation contains a moral issue. The overall results from participants demonstrated a low moral sensitivity to the unethical occurrences around them during their employment. When a moral issue was identified, participants made an ethical judgment, described their motivations, and ultimately their decisions to act or not. The experiences described in the results closely aligned with Chaleff's (1997) dimensions of "courageous followership" (p. 6).

The results were also reviewed through a morality lens of antecedents of unethical follower behavior. The justifications provided by participants for their thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace align closely with seven of the eight mechanisms of moral engagement identified by Bandura and colleagues' (1996). The mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanizing, and disregard or distortion of consequences. Two participants displayed a strong moral identity (DeTienne et al., 2021), which prompted their relatively quick ethical decisions to leave the company, aligning with existing research by (Noghani, 2021).

Research Question 2: How Do the Lived Experiences of Employees in the United States Reflect the Influence of Social Identification With a Leader During Unethical Dilemmas in Biomedical Corporations?

Phenomenology focuses on understanding peoples' lived experiences from their perspective (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019), which are defined as the participants' "perceptions, thoughts, ideas, and experiences" (p. 30-31). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the type of phenomenology used in this study. According to Smith (2011), there are three foundations of IPA: (a) IPA is rooted in traditional phenomenology, focusing on the lived

experience from the participant's perspective; (b) the lived experience is analyzed and interpreted in the hermeneutic tradition; and (c) IPA is idiographic. The results of this study are voluminous and rich. More than 8.5 hours of interviews were recorded, resulting in 465 pages of interview transcripts of participant experiences. Including triangulation data, I identified 337 pieces of information coded across 95 categories.

To explain the co-creation of outcomes between leaders and followers, Haslam and colleagues (2019) proposed a framework known as DAMILEF. The DAMILEF theory presents that IL and EF are based on a shared social identity and cyclically build upon each other. To foster IL, leaders typically apply four approaches: identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2014). Engaged followers embrace the shared social identity, understand the group objectives, and creatively and eagerly act to achieve these goals (Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2019).

All seven participants' experiences aligned with the DAMILEF framework. Three participants directly aligned. These participants identified with their leadership and supported unethical activities. Three other participants aligned with DAMILEF in an inverse direction. In other words, these participants did not identify with their leadership, and they did not support unethical activities. One participant was neutrally identified and moderately engaged. That is, he did not directly support unethical activities, but he remained employed for a prolonged period.

The social identity approach to leadership combines two theories: SIT and SCT (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). Social identity refers to the aspects of a person's self-concept defined by the groups they consider themselves to be part of (Tajfel, 1975). The SCT comprises a combination of three assessments individuals perform to understand their social identity: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 2010). As an

approach to leadership, IL allows leaders to foster social identification within a group by embodying the group identity (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019). The current study aligned with SIT and SCT; the results demonstrated that the former employees actively assessed their group identities.

Highlighting a potentially detrimental impact of high LMX, employees reporting strong LMX were more likely to engage in UPB if their leader modeled the activity (Nguyen et al., 2021). Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) defined leader immorality encouragement (LIE) as the employee's understanding that their leadership encourages unethical behaviors that benefit the organization (UPB). The authors found a positive relationship between employee willingness to commit UPB and their perception of LMX strength. This relationship was also found in the current study especially for two participants that experienced a change in relationship with their supervisor and a concomitant change in their willingness to tolerate unethical activities. The largest group of results were coded against the fear of backlash, reflecting the participants' observations of negative impact on colleagues. These results align with social cognitive theory which posits that individuals learn by observing others and the consequences of their behavior (Bandura et al., 1996).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. This chapter began with an overview of the trustworthiness of the data. According to the criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the four components of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The chapter continued with the comprehensive presentation of results aligned with Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of employees within the United States who support unethical activities in biomedical corporations? Three themes were discussed. The first theme was the range of emotions the participants experienced in the workplace. Results were presented according to eight primary emotion categories based on Plutchik's wheel of emotions (Roeckelein, 2006): fear, sadness, anger, disgust, anticipation, happiness, surprise, and trust and in the order of the frequency of the findings. Next results were stated for the second theme: the workplace conditions that supported corruption. Eight sub-themes were described: (a) centralized power, (b) chaotic environment, (c) dismissal of concerns, (d) virtuous objective, (e) group identification, (f) employee turnover, (g) information control, and (h) excessive secrecy and security. The final theme presented for research question one was the justifications for participants' thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace. The results for this theme are categorized by the explanations, including (a) potential retribution, (b) financial opportunities, (c) dismissal of complaints, (d) known investor risk, (e) locus of responsibility, (f) normal startup activities, and (g) supporting the goal.

The chapter continued with a comprehensive presentation of the findings related to Research Question 2: How do the lived experiences of employees in the United States reflect the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations? The two themes associated with this research question were the participants' experiences related to corporate leadership and their experiences related to direct supervisors. Results of the first theme were presented according to participants' experiences, thoughts, and opinions of CL1, CL2, and the extended leadership team. Results from the second theme were presented in eight sub-themes related to identification with leadership and shared social

identification: (a) champion for the team, (b) connection, (c) cohesiveness, (d) leadership ability, (e) team representation, (f) team protection, (g) similar values, and (h) structure for success.

The chapter concluded with a comparison of the findings and themes for alignment and consistency against the theoretical frameworks of Haslam et al.'s (Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2019) DAMILEF and phenomenology. Comparisons were made with the established theories of the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007), ethical decision-making (Rest, 1994), mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996), LMX (Graen & Schiemann, 1978), SIT and SCT (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the following: (a) potential influences on the interpretation of results, (b) the extent to which the findings address the problem statement and purpose of the study; (c) the extent to which the findings are consistent with extant research, (d) the implications of the study, and (e) the recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem to be addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. The biomedical industry is highly complex and vulnerable to corruption (Mackey et al., 2016). Transparency International (2016) identifies the paucity of data about corruption as a major challenge in addressing biomedical corruption. Complicit employees are required to execute corporate corruption successfully (Mawritz et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007). Without a better understanding of cooperative followers, efforts to prevent corruption will fail, and corrupt organizations will continue to have a widespread impact (Somers, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). Research has primarily focused on leadership and corporate culture, leaving the third crucial element, the role of employees in corruption, less understood (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Researchers have called for more studies about the influences on employee behavior as cooperative followers.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived experiences of United States-based employees who socially identify with their leadership are influenced within a corrupt corporation. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design was used to explore employees' complex lived experiences (Farrell, 2020) during their involvement in unethical activity at their employer's behest. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted with seven former employees of a large, private, biomedical company prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice for its corrupt workplace practices. The interview questions allowed me to better understand following constructs: relational identification with a leader, collective identity, ideological emphasis, value alignment with a leader and group, and willingness to adapt behavior. I also used multiple data sources to

triangulate the data, including transcribed audio interviews and recorded depositions from former employees of the firm.

The results of the study aligned strongly with the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007). Former employees in unethical circumstances engaged in cognitive and moral assessments and these analyses were intertwined with social dynamics with their leadership and colleagues. The participants expressed wide-ranging negative emotional responses related to their experiences. Moral sensitivity, that is, the ability to recognize an ethical dilemma and the first step in the ethical decision-making (EDM) process, was commonly missed by participants, potentially creating unwitting conformers. Whenever participants entered the EDM process, moral fatigue was prevalent due to DL and a corporate culture that promoted, sustained, and failed to prevent corruption.

All seven participants' experiences aligned with the dual agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership (DAMILEF) framework. IL is a social influence process focused on a leader "representing, promoting, crafting, and embedding followers' group identity" (Milesi, 2022, p. 886). Identification with leadership varied from direct supervisors to corporate leadership. Leadership identification also varied across dimensions of leader-built cohesion, connection, and protection; sharing similar values; being "one of the team;" leadership capability; and success structures. The results related to employees' assessments of leadership capability or protection from leadership may indicate new insights in the literature. The corporate leaders promoted IL through all four components of Steffens et al.'s approaches to IL. The results broadened Steffens et al.'s concept of impresarioship to encompass perceptions of success, regardless of whether these perceptions align with reality.

There were certain limitations to the study which represent weaknesses that can affect the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Bloomberg, 2023). Due to its covert and morality-laden nature, research about unethical situations can be challenging (Hassan et al., 2023). Reflecting and speaking about participating in unethical activities can be especially difficult. To mitigate this limitation, I reassured the participants of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data. Moreover, limiting the study participants to former employees reduced the threat of consequences for their honesty. Despite these assurances, only 4% of employees who were contacted ultimately participated in the study. Moreover, although I directed recruitment at active LinkedIn users, 84% of employees who were contacted did not respond to my outreach.

Given the complexity of the research requiring the time-consuming research design of IPA, the number of participants was limited. Another limitation was that participants had to communicate in English sufficiently well to articulate detailed descriptions of their experiences in a language I could understand. I recruited volunteers in English and pre-screened potential participants to ensure communication was not a barrier. However, this eliminated participants from the study who were not fluent in English or had difficulty communicating verbally.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the major findings of the study and any factors that may have influenced the interpretation of results. The findings are then reviewed in context of the study's problem and purpose and in relation to the two theoretical frameworks and the extant literature. The theoretical implications of the study are comprehensively discussed before presenting recommendations for the progression of followership theory through future research from cognitive, moral, and social perspectives.

Discussion

The discussion is organized around the major findings of the current study. Interpretations are aligned with the two research questions (RQs); their related themes through cognitive, moral, and social lenses; and the study results in alignment to extant literature. The discussion continues with a presentation of influences in relation to each RQ, then the discussion concludes with the implications and outcomes of the study.

Research Question 1: What Are the Lived Experiences of Employees Within the United States Who Support Unethical Activities in Biomedical Corporations?

The results presented in Chapter 4 provided three themes regarding the lived experiences of employees within the United States who supported unethical activities within a biomedical corporation. The themes were (a) range of emotions in the workplace, (b) workplace conditions that supported corruption, and (c) justifications for participant's thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace. The interpretation of results for RQ1 is presented for each theme, along with the contributions to existing literature, descriptions of alignment with the theoretical framework of the study, and potential influences on the interpretation of results.

Interpretation of RQ1 Theme One: Range of Emotions in the Workplace. Using Plutchik and Ax's (1967) wheel of emotions, I determined that the participants experienced a wide range of emotions during their employment. Experiences related to the negative emotions of anger, fear, sadness, and disgust were reported nearly four times as often as the positive emotions of happiness, anticipation, surprise, and trust. The largest group of results were coded against the fear of backlash, reflecting the participants' observations of negative impact on colleagues. These results align with social cognitive theory which posits that individuals learn by observing others and the consequences of their behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Fear of job loss

was commonly reported and heavily supported in the triangulation data; this fear was justified based on the high turnover rate that was reported. Fear of legal retribution was also common and reasonable based on the actions taken by the firm, and eventually those taken by the United States Department of Justice.

Findings of fatigue were also common in the participant and triangulation data. This aligns with research that found that ethical behavior expends much more cognitive energy than unethical behavior and can result in moral fatigue (Gino et al., 2011). Generalized anxiety was reported by several participants and found in the triangulation data as well. Likewise, the uncomfortable psychological state of cognitive dissonance was reported by participants and found in the triangulation data.

Six of the seven participants reported feelings of sadness, most commonly in the form of disappointment in their colleagues' unethical decisions and in the failure to reach the firm's virtuous vision. Findings indicate that former employees were distressed by the suicide of their colleague and by the company's handling of the situation. Anger was a common emotion in the findings, primarily in the form of frustration. This was especially prevalent when employees' concerns were dismissed. Disgust, primarily in the form of insult and skepticism, were found as well.

These findings of wide-ranging negative emotions align with and contribute to the detrimental impacts that have been reported in the literature. These extant findings include cognitive dissonance (Yang et al., 2022), decreased job satisfaction, and increased stress (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Ogunfowora et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Palte employees also reported decreased organizational citizenship behavior and productivity along with increased turnover which align with Almeida et al.'s (2021) research.

Participants expressed positive emotions, such as excitement about working with the firm and advancing a virtuous objective. A few participants described feelings of surreality about their situation in hindsight, but not during their employment. This aligns with the finding that three participants stated that fraud did not occur during their tenure, despite documented evidence to the contrary. Trust was expressed in the form of camaraderie with teammates during stressful situations. Three participants believed in the CLs and the vision, especially early in their tenures. Together, these findings align with Thoroughgood's (2012) tenet that DL is rarely completely toxic and contributes to DL literature.

Interpretation of RQ1 Theme Two: Workplace Conditions that Supported Corruption. Organizational culture plays a critical role in a company's vulnerability to toxic leadership (Akinyele & Chen, 2025). The toxic triangle theory posits that there are three components of toxic organization: DL, SFs, and a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007). All three factors were addressed in the current study. The findings of the current study aligned with Shaw et al. (2011) who described four personality-related attributes of DL: (a) tyrannical behavior, such as arrogance, obstinance, and meanness; (b) laziness or incompetence; (c) high emotionality, including compulsivity and lack of self-control; and (d) carelessness or emotionally unintelligent interactions in the workplace. Participants described all four of these components of DL. The CLs demonstrated coercive, selfish motives and the outcomes of DL negatively impacted the followers, aligning with Thoroughgood and colleagues' (2012) features of DL. Moreover, participants reported that the CLs were not entirely destructive, which also contributed to Thoroughgood et al.'s description of DL.

The SFs in the present study aligned with Aumentado et al.'s (2024) research which found that employees who tolerated corrupt leadership did so because they either benefited from

the corruption, feared retaliation, felt powerless, or were ambivalent. Padilla et al. (2007) defined two types of SFs based on their motivation: colluders and conformers. Based on the study's findings of commonly fearing retaliation and having their concerns ignored, the participants aligned almost exclusively with Padilla and colleagues' definition of SFs who are conformers rather than colluders.

The results of this study solidly aligned with Padilla et al.'s (2007) description of the four elements that contribute to environments where DL can thrive, "instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and the absence of checks and balances" (p. 185). The participants' descriptions of a chaotic environment and frequent employee turnover align with the elements of instability and perceived threat. Information control and excessive security were systemic. Additionally, the lack of checks and balances was prevalent based on the frequent findings of centralized power and dismissal of employees' concerns. These environmental conditions promoted, sustained, or failed to prevent corruption.

Interpretation of RQ1 Theme Three: Justifications for Participant's Thoughts, Opinions, and Actions in the Workplace. The participants reported a wide range of explanations for their thoughts, opinions, and actions surrounding ethically questionable circumstances. The current study coded 101 references across 14 types of explanations for the participants' decision-making (Appendix C). The top categories that were reported by more than one data source were: "concern about backlash" (29 references), "this is normal for a startup" (16), "didn't do anything wrong" (12), "nobody listened anyway" (9), "supporting the goal" (7), "financial benefit" (7), "not my responsibility" (5), "went along with the crowd" (4), "the risk was understood" (2). The justifications were categorized into the following sub-themes, including (a) potential retribution, (b) normal startup activities, (c) dismissal of complaints, (d)

supporting the goal, (e) financial opportunities, (f) locus of responsibility, and (g) known investor risk.

Researchers most commonly adopt cognitive theories to investigate ethical behavior and have found that affect and cognition are the two essential components that influence ethical (and unethical) behavior in the workplace (He et al., 2023). According to Kohlberg's (1971) cognitive moral development (CMD) theory, in addition to maturing cognitive skills, social interaction is crucial to developing morality and the associated ethical decision making. One factor that CMD does not account for is ethical relativism, which is the propensity to make ethical decisions based on the current situation rather than based on universal moral standards (DeTienne et al., 2021). Given the wide-range of justification, the results of the current study align with and contribute to DeTienne and colleagues' assertion of the importance of ethical relativism in decision-making.

Rest (1994) defined four components necessary for ethical decision making: moral sensitivity (recognition), moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Rest's four-component theory emphasized a person's ability to recognize that a situation contains a moral issue. The overall results from participants demonstrated a low moral sensitivity to the unethical occurrences around them during their employment. When a moral issue was identified, participants made an ethical judgment, described their motivations, and ultimately their decisions to act or not. The study findings exemplified and contributed to Rest's model.

Chaleff (1997) summarized five dimensions of "courageous followership" (p. 4). as the courage to assume responsibility, courage to serve, courage to challenge, courage to participate in transformation, and courage to take moral action. The experiences described in the results of the current study reflected Chaleff's courage to: (a) assume responsibility, for example, by understanding and executing on the vision; (b) serve, for example, by working extreme hours; (c)

challenge, for example, voicing concerns; and (d) take moral action. The moral action reported repeatedly during the study was leaving the company.

As described in the framework, the results were also reviewed through a morality lens of antecedents of unethical follower behavior. Two participants also displayed a strong moral identity (DeTienne et al., 2021), which prompted their relatively quick ethical decisions to leave the company, aligning with research compiled by Newman et al. (2020) showing heightened turnover intention in moral dissonance. The justifications provided by participants for their thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace align closely with seven of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement identified by Bandura and colleagues' (1996). The mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanizing, and disregard or distortion of consequences. Table 3 displays a mapping of representative responses from the study to the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Table 3

Alignment of Representative Results to Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

Disengagement mechanism	Representative finding(s)
Moral justification	"It was a virtuous cause"
Euphemistic labeling	"Misrepresentations" rather than fraud or lies
Advantageous comparison	"This is normal for a start-up"
Displacement of responsibility	"Leadership insisted"
Diffusion of responsibility	"Nobody asked me," "I was only doing <i>internal testing</i> "
Dehumanizing	"The only people who really got hurt were rich investors"
Disregard/distortion of consequences	"Doctors would see odd results and ask for retesting, right?"

The interpretations of the RQ1 findings may have been influenced by several factors. Since this study occurred a decade or more after the participants' employment, the emotions,

activities, and opinions they expressed were likely influenced by the fully informed hindsight participants had during the interview that they did not have during their employment. This is a unique part of phenomenology, in which the participants utilize information they receive at any time during and after a situation to make sense of the situation. I attempted to retrieve information the participant had during their employment as opposed to afterwards.

Regarding theme one, the participants may have assumed that negative emotions were being sought or were more appropriately matched with the circumstances. Non-verbal utterances such as laughter, hesitation, or change in tone (Smith & Nizza, 2022) are crucial to interpreting emotion. As such, unless they were explicitly stated by a former employee, emotions were not assessed from the written triangulation data sources. This influenced the triangulation of emotion-related findings. Feelings are also culturally embedded and affected by every individual's other life experiences. The full impact of such factors cannot fully be known by the researcher.

Although I attempted to ameliorate concerns about full and honest disclosure, embarrassment or fear of judgement may have also influenced the participants' responses. I did not interview any participants that were categorized as colluders. This is a known challenge in ethics research (Hassan et al., 2023). This absence of these SFs influenced the results the research could obtain which may have influenced descriptions of emotions, CLs, and the corporate culture. However, the current study contributed to the toxic triangle literature from the conformer's perspective.

The researcher's preconceptions and experiences must be acknowledged as potential influences on interpretation (Smith & Nizza, 2022). To mitigate this, I identified potential biases

and bracketed them in an analysis journal prior to interviewing participants. Based on an IPA best practice, the bracketed information was reviewed cyclically during the data analysis.

Research Question 2: How Do the Lived Experiences of Employees in The United States Reflect the Influence of Social Identification with a Leader During Unethical Dilemmas in Biomedical Corporations?

The results presented in Chapter 4 were divided into two themes about how the lived experiences of employees in the United States were influenced by social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations. The themes were categorized based on employee relationships with corporate leadership and direct supervisors. Due to the flat hierarchy of the corporation, three participants reported directly to the CLs and were also direct supervisors of a team. This was unanticipated and offered a unique opportunity to review the results from a DS' perspective as well. The interpretation of results for RQ2 is presented for each theme, along with the contributions to existing literature, descriptions of alignment with the theoretical framework of the study, and potential influences on the interpretation of results.

Interpretation of RQ2 Theme One: Experiences Related to Corporate Leadership.

To explain the co-creation of outcomes between leaders and followers, Haslam and colleagues (2019) proposed a framework known as DAMILEF. The DAMILEF theory presents that IL and EF are based on a shared social identity and cyclically built upon each other. The DAMILEF theory provided the framework for the current study.

To foster IL, leaders typically apply four approaches: identity prototypicality, identity advancement, identity entrepreneurship, and identity impresarioship (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2014). According to the results, the CLs promoted IL through all four components. For example, the CLs demonstrated identity prototypicality by being a model member of the group.

The CLs advanced the group's identity by acting as champions for the company and defending the in-group from the out-group. The CLs established the boundaries of the group's values and ideals, thereby creating a sense of "us." Finally, as strong orchestrators of the group's vision, the CLs demonstrated impresarioship, in which leaders made the group matter by driving the virtuous cause, creating media hype, and hiding the truth about the company's actual product capabilities.

Corporate Lead 1 was particularly skilled at identity impresarioship. CL1's charisma was recognized repeatedly by participants and in the triangulation data. Individuals often stated that they believed in the CL1 and her ability to attain her vision. Charismatic leaders are motivated, inspiring to employees, and skilled at impression management (Noghani, 2021). Charismatic leaders can be empowering, egalitarian, and motivated by serving others. However, charismatic leaders can also be manipulative, dictatorial, and selfish. CL1 was described by study participants as "arrogant," a "megalomaniac" and a "narcissist" who could build "connections" by being "good at playing the game." When followers identify with their charismatic leaders, Noghani (2021) described three potential outcomes: increased trust in the leader's vision and morality, affection for the leader, and "willing, unquestioning acceptance of and obedience to the leader" (p. 6). The findings of the current study align fully or partly with these outcomes.

The participants of the study showed identification with the CLs as defined by Walumbwa and Hartnell (2011). For example, the participants (a) had faith in their leadership, (b) were proud to work for them, (c) defended their leadership, and (d) used inclusive terms such as "we" when speaking about them. Shamir (1998) described similar factors for identification with leadership but included two more components that were found in the results of the current study: willingness to sacrifice and identification with the unit. The first component was clearly

demonstrated by participants and triangulation data by employees who worked exceedingly long hours and in uncomfortable conditions. The second component, identification with the unit, was demonstrated by inside jokes, all-hands meeting activities, and frequent cohesion within teams.

Engaged followers embrace the shared social identity, understand the in-group's objectives, and creatively and eagerly act to achieve these goals (Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2019). Several participants and former employees from the triangulation data demonstrated EF as defined by Haslam and colleagues. There were plentiful reports of cohesive teams, excitement about the mission, and justifications for acts of omission that kept the company advancing towards its goals. Moreover, two participants described the activities of colleagues who blatantly committed unethical activities to achieve the vision.

The findings contributed to the existing literature and framework of the study. All seven participants' experiences aligned with the DAMILEF framework. Three participants directly aligned, that is, they identified with their leadership and were engaged followers. Three other participants aligned with DAMILEF in an inverse direction, that is, these participants did not identify with their leadership and were *not* engaged followers (they did *not* support unethical activities). One participant was neutrally identified and moderately engaged. In this case, they did not *directly* engage in unethical activities, but they remained employed for a prolonged period in a leadership position. These findings align with Shamir et al. (1998) who found variation between the identification with leadership, the organization, and smaller units of the organization.

Highlighting a potentially detrimental impact of high leader-member exchange (LMX), Nguyen et al. (2021) found that employees who report strong LMX were more likely to engage in unethical behaviors that benefit the organization (UPB) if their leader modeled the activity.

Mesdaghinia et al. (2023) defined leader immorality encouragement as the employee's understanding that their leadership encourages UPB. The authors found a positive relationship between employee willingness to commit UPB and their perception of LMX strength. This relationship was found in the current study for P1, P4, and P6. The insight gained from P4 and P6 was especially poignant as they experienced changes in the relationship with their supervisors and concomitant changes in their willingness to support UPB.

Interpretation of RQ2 Theme Two: Dimensions of Identification with Workplace Leaders. The semi-structured interviews allowed investigation of the following constructs: relational identification with a leader, collective identity, ideological emphasis, value alignment with a leader and group, and willingness to adapt behavior. The results comprised eight sub-themes related to identification with leadership and shared social identification: (a) champion for the team, (b) connection, (c) cohesiveness, (d) leadership ability, (e) team representation, (f) team protection, (g) similar values, and (h) structure for success.

I analyzed the relationships between dimensions of IL and engaged followers (EFs). I identified a participant as an EF if they directly or indirectly supported fraudulent or unethical activities. A participant was identified with their leader when they aligned more than half of the dimensions investigated. As shown in Tables 4 and 5, participants identified more with the corporate leaders (CLs) than their direct supervisors (DSs).

Table 4*Dimensions of Identification with Direct Supervisor*

P	Champ	Conn	Cohes	Ability	One of the team	Prot	Shared values	Success	ID DS	EF
P1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
P2	No	No	No	Neutral	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
P3	No	Neutral	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
P4	No	Neutral	Yes	Neutral	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
P5	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
P6 ^a	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
P6b ^a	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
P7	Yes	Neutral	Neutral	No	Neutral	No	Neutral	Neutral	No	Neutral

Note. “Yes” indicates the participant expressed overall agreement with the dimension, while “No” indicates the participant expressed overall disagreement with the dimension. “Neutral” indicates the participant expressed both agreement and disagreement with the dimension. P = participant, Champ = Champion, Conn = Connection, Cohes = Cohesion, Prot = Protector, Success = Success structure, ID DS = Identified with direct supervisor, EF = Engaged follower.

^aParticipant 6 is represented in two rows because they had two roles with different DSs.

Table 5*Dimensions of Identification with Corporate Leadership*

P	Champ	Conn	Cohes	Ability	One of the team	Prot	Shared values	Success	ID CL	EF
P1	Yes	Yes	Neutral	Neutral	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
P2	Yes	No	No		No	Yes		Yes	No	No
P3	No	Neutral	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
P4	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
P5	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
P6a ^a	Yes	Neutral	Yes	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
P6b ^a	Yes	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	No	No	Neutral	Yes
P7	Yes	Neutral	Neutral	No	Neutral	No	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral

Note. “Yes” indicates the participant expressed overall agreement with the dimension, while “No” indicates the participant expressed overall disagreement with the dimension. “Neutral” indicates the participant expressed both agreement and disagreement with the dimension. P = participant, Champ = Champion, Conn = Connection, Cohes = Cohesion, Prot = Protector, Success = Success structure, ID CL = Identified with corporate leadership, EF = Engaged follower.

^aParticipant 6 is represented in two rows because they had two roles with different DSs.

Across the participants, there was no pattern between EF and identification with their DS. However, identification with CL was more aligned with a participant being an EF. For example, P4 was an EF who identified with CL but not his DS. Similarly, P6b and P7 were more identified with CL than their DSs, and both were EFs.

Due to the flat hierarchy of the corporation, three participants reported directly to the CLs and were also direct supervisors of a team. This was unanticipated and offered a unique

opportunity to review the results from a DS perspective. These participants reported robust connections with their team, strong cohesion within their team, and fervent protection of their teams. In two of these cases, the participants did not identify with their DS, who were also CLs. Both participants had relatively short tenures of one or three years. In the third case, P7 was only neutrally identified with the CLs, and they were somewhat engaged followers. This indicates that strong social identification with a subordinate group may moderate the impact of not being identified with their leadership. This aligns with research that has shown that a sense of belonging within the workplace increases employee satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty (Mumcu, 2024).

When examining dimensions of leadership identification results at a group experiential theme (GET) level, several key findings arose. Participants who identified closely with a leader were more likely to feel that the leader fostered cohesion and built connections within the group. Sharing similar values is important to identifying with DSs, but this dimension is even more important with CL. Feeling that the leader is “one of the team” was very important in IL with a DS but less so with the CLs. Similarly, seeing a DS as a champion and protector was essential to every participant; however, it was not important in identification with CLs. With regards to a participant’s assessment of their DS’s capability, even when a participant felt their DS was a capable manager, the participant did not necessarily identify with that DS. Participants still identified with CLs even if they deemed the CLs as unskilled in management. This indicated that leadership capability was more important when identifying with DSs than CLs. To establish identification with a CL, creating a structure for success was important to all participants who were also DSs, but it was not important to any non-DS participants.

The findings regarding connection and shared values aligned with and contributed to Walumbwa and Hartnell's factors of relationship identification (2011). Similarly, participants' identification with leadership was based on their leader's ability to be "one of the team," be a champion for the team, and to create cohesiveness. These constructs are related to Steffens et al.'s (2014) identity advancement, prototypicality, and entrepreneurship, respectively. Creating structures for success is a hallmark feature of Steffens and the team's construct of impresarioship.

The finding about success structures diverges from Steffens and colleagues' (2014) measurements of impresarioship in the identity leadership inventory. Steffens and his team describe impresarioship as creating the structures for success to make the group matter not only internally, but to out-groups too. The CLs created a structure for success in terms of financial investment. However, leaders did not create structures for true success from the participants' perspective to develop the product Palte was creating. The CLs created the impression of success by repeating the virtuous cause, creating media hype, and hiding the truth about the company's actual product capabilities. Various elements, including charismatic leadership, effective impression management, regulatory circumvention, and the prevailing high-growth start-up culture, may have contributed to an enhanced perception of success that was not aligned with tangible performance results. This insight is significant as it broadens Steffens et al.'s concept of impresarioship to encompass perceptions of success, regardless of whether these perceptions align with reality.

To the my knowledge, there is a dearth of literature related to IL and its connection with followers' assessments of leadership ability or the sense of protection by a leader. One empirical study found that identification with a leader is related to that leader's capability (Riesenmy, 2008), but it has not been theorized how IL is related to followers' assessments of leadership

capability or protection from leadership. The findings from the current study indicate this may be an important insight.

The interpretations of RQ2 may have been influenced by several factors. A key influence was that, due to the flat hierarchy of the firm, three participants' DS was also a CL. Additionally, participant 6 was in a unique situation because he had two roles with different DSs. The second role also provided direct knowledge of unethical activities which changed his perception drastically during the second position.

Since this study occurred a decade or more after the participants' employment, the insights they conveyed were likely affected by the fully informed hindsight participants had during the interview that they did not have during their employment. This is a unique part of phenomenology, in which the participants utilize information they receive at any time during and after a situation to make sense of the situation. The participants were from varying cultural backgrounds; expectations surrounding power dynamics are culturally embedded and may have affected the participants' assessments of identification with leadership or other subtleties. Phenomena shared by the participants are affected by every individual's life experience, unrelated to employment at Palte. Such factors cannot be fully known by the researcher.

The researcher's preconceptions and experiences must be acknowledged as potential influences on interpretation (Smith & Nizza, 2022). To mitigate this, I identified potential biases and bracketed them in an analysis journal prior to interviewing participants. Based on an IPA best practice, the bracketed information was reviewed cyclically during the data analysis.

Implications and Outcomes of the Study

The implications of the current study are extensive. The problem to be addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of

corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. Exploring this complex problem through a phenomenological framework was reinforced. Employees in unethical circumstances engage in cognitive and moral assessments and these analyses are intertwined with social dynamics, and the IPA research design produced rich data that could be analyzed through cognitive, moral, and social perspectives.

Given the sole objective of Palte, it is arguable that every employee supported the company's corruption, albeit to varying degrees of action and awareness. Upon deep exploration of the participants and the triangulation data a startling truth became apparent: none of Palte's approximately 1,000 employees blew the whistle because of their ethical concerns. Ultimately, both whistleblowers reported their concerns because they were protecting themselves and their family from potential retaliation.

Moral sensitivity (the ability to recognize an ethical dilemma) is the first step in the ethical decision-making (EDM) process. This step was commonly missed by participants, which may have created unwitting conformers, highlighting a need for increased ethical awareness in employees. Whenever participants entered the EDM process, moral fatigue was prevalent. Gino et al. (2011), found dishonesty increases under such circumstances so employees may become more susceptible to unethical choices. Moreover, DL created fear and other circumstances which exacerbated conforming behavior. The conducive environment promoted, sustained, and failed to prevent corruption.

By recognizing and examining the broad range of emotions participants experienced and the justifications they provided for their thoughts, opinions, and actions in the workplace, the research directly addressed the study's problem. Deeply investigating the social identification of participants with their leadership allowed me to address the study's purpose of exploring former

employees' lived experiences. The study underscored that identification with both leadership and colleagues is important in driving EF. This outcome demonstrated the importance of dynamics within the group, independent of the leader, to drive the creative actions EFs take to advance the group's goal (Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2019). Connection and cohesion with a subordinate team also contributed to a supervisor's motivation to stay in an ethically challenging workplace, especially as a protective mechanism for that team.

The results align strongly with the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007). The study confirmed that DL, SFs, and conducive environments contribute to toxic organization and detrimental results. If any of the three components were missing, Palte would not have evolved into the corrupt, unethical organization it became. Given the dearth of literature regarding employees' role in the triad, as compared to the other two components, the study contributed to the theoretical knowledge base and offered new insights into the dimensions of identification with leadership in creating EF.

The study also elucidated broader systemic implications, not directly related to the findings. Palte's improper testing, enabled by weak regulatory oversight, endangered patients. Employees of biomedical firms cannot rely on United States federal regulation alone to prevent unsafe medical devices and dangerous blood testing. Private companies are less regulated than public ones, so similar misconduct could occur in industries outside of biomedicine.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for practice are presented according to the triad of components required for toxic organizations to exist. Employees should be protected from becoming SFs, a key component of corrupt organizations based on the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007). There are several ways this can be accomplished. Based on the finding that employees failed to

recognize ethical dilemmas in the workplace, corporate leadership should proactively incorporate recurring ethical awareness training, to facilitate EDM (Rest, 1994) and prevent moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). This training could serve as a step in creating a corporate culture that is less conducive to unethical activities, the second critical element of corrupt organizations. (Padilla et al., 2007).

Since study participants were found to be berated, threatened, and ignored when they voiced their concerns, confidential and independent ethical reporting mechanisms should be standard practice for companies. DL, the third factor in the toxic triangle theory (Padilla et al., 2007) must be prevented from becoming established and eradicated once it is recognized. Qualities and tendencies related to DL can be assessed during the hiring process. Moreover, the training could help encourage employees to recognize and bring awareness without fear of retaliation. These measures could prevent destructive centralized power.

Due to CL1's influence within the board, implementing checks and balances between directors and management is advisable. As a privately held company, Palte avoided federal transparency requirements by structuring its shareholder documents accordingly. This allowed the company to mislead investors and issue fraudulent financial reports. Lawmakers and academics have suggested broadening federal regulations for large private companies by introducing new reporting thresholds, strengthening whistleblower protections, and requiring governance reporting based on systemic importance. These measures would bring the United States closer to European and United Kingdom standards and may reduce the opportunity for unethical practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study was limited in terms of the number of participants, which may prevent confidence in theoretical application of the findings. This is especially true with regard to the two new dimensions of leadership identification, a sense of protection, and leadership capability. With a greater number of participants more information could be obtained, and more insight could be gained especially surrounding the dimensions of leadership identification within and between employees who were EFs and those who were not. Future research could include quantitative measures of the dimensions of IL, but given the complexity of the problem, this would likely need to be implemented as part of a mixed methodology study. Quantitative methods to measure EF would also be helpful to foster uniformity in the research.

The current study did not incorporate personality-related investigation of the employees. Including such information could allow deeper categorization of compliant followers as defined by Thoroughgood et al. (2012). Similarly, exploring followers' self-esteem could expand research by Mercadante et al. (2023) related to susceptibility to DLs. Likewise, further research could develop the understanding that Zeng et al. (2023) found in which self-efficacy mediated the relationship between followers' identities and followership behaviors, leading to positive or negative organizational outcomes.

In the DAMILEF framework, social identity is a fundamental component. The social identity approach to leadership combines two theories: SIT and SCT (Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). Social identity refers to the aspects of a person's self-concept defined by the groups they consider themselves to be part of (Tajfel, 1975). The SCT comprises a combination of three assessments individuals perform to understand their social identity: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 2010). As an approach to

leadership, IL allows leaders to foster social identification within a group by embodying the group's identity (Haslam, Steffens, et al., 2019). The current study did not obtain enough information related to the employees' assessment of their group identities. Future research could focus on these aspects and how they interact with IL.

Study Summary

The problem to be addressed in this study was the need to better understand why certain employees become cooperative followers of corrupt leaders within biomedical corporations. This qualitative, IPA study explored the complex lived experiences of seven former employees of a large, private, biomedical company prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice for its corrupt practices. To make sense of their experiences, the former employees assessed their circumstances through cognitive and moral lenses. These analyses were intertwined with social dynamics with their leadership and colleagues. All seven participants' experiences aligned with the DAMILEF framework. Identification with leadership varied from direct supervisors to corporate leadership and across dimensions of leader identification. The results related to employees' assessments of leadership capability or protection from leadership may indicate new insights in the literature. The also results broadened Steffens et al.'s concept of impresarioship to encompass perceptions of success, regardless of whether these perceptions align with reality.

The company studied was notable for its brief existence, focus on developing a single product, swift and massive financial backing, weak board of directors, extensive high-profile connections, lack of regulatory supervision, and flat organizational structure. This rare combination created a distinctive chance to gather insights into employees' IL and EF in an environment shaped by DL and a corporate culture that promoted unethical behavior, which are risks that may arise in any corporation lacking adequate safeguards and governance measures.

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Appendix A: Literature Search Terms

I employed Boolean operators such as “and,” “or,” and “not” with various combinations of the key terms, which are listed below. I applied proximity, exact phrase, and nesting operators to refine the searches. I expanded search terms using modifiers like related words, related subjects, and “*.” For searches that returned high volumes of results, I reran those queries with placement restrictions, focusing on the title or abstract.

Leader	Destructive leadership	Tyrannical leadership
Authoritarian leadership	Ethical	Organization
Identity leadership	Unethical	Corporate
Prototypicality	Susceptible	Healthcare
Obedience	Collusion	Biomedical
Leader-member exchange	Complicit	Pharmaceutical
Ethical decision making	Cognitive dissonance	Social identity
Workplace deviant behavior	Moral disengagement	Phenomenology
Toxic triangle	Moral injury	Integrative
Follower	Moral fatigue	Phenomenological analysis
Engaged followership	Corruption	

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What attracted you to the company?
2. If it was different from what you anticipated, how so?
3. How did public reports differ from internal happenings?
4. Describe any doubt you had about the company's public claims.
5. What was your relationship with your managers like? Do/Did you feel connected with them? Do/Did you share similar values? Describe.
 - a. Thinking about your manager in relation to your team, to what extent would you say s/he was “one of us” or a “model member” of your team?
 - b. To what extent would you describe your manager as a “champion” for your team?
 - c. Did your manager create cohesiveness within your team? Explain.
 - d. To what extent did your manager create structures supporting your team’s effectiveness/success within the company?
6. What was your relationship with corporate leaders like? Do/Did you feel connected with them? Do/Did you share similar values? Describe.
 - a. To what extent would you say s/he was “one of us” or a “model member” of your company?
 - b. To what extent would you describe your corporate leader as a “champion” for your company?
 - c. Did your corporate leader create cohesiveness within your company? Explain.
 - d. To what extent did your corporate leader create structures supporting your effectiveness/success within the company?

7. BRANCHING QUESTION: Do you feel you participated in activities supporting the corruption?

a. If yes:

i. Did you recognize it at the time or in hindsight?

ii. If then:

1. Did you discuss this with your colleagues? Peers? Leaders?

Subordinates? Describe. ^^

2. Did you discuss this with anyone outside the company? Who?

Describe. ^^

3. What actions did you take to support the corrupt activity, if any?

4. What actions did you take to thwart/disrupt the corrupt activity, if any?

5. Did you report your concerns? Internally? Externally? Expand.

6. Please describe the corrupt activity(ies).

iii. If later:

1. What made you recognize?

2. Please describe the corrupt activity(ies).

3. Did you discuss this with your former colleagues? ^^How did that make you feel?

b. If no:

i. Did you recognize the unethical behavior of colleagues? Describe.

ii. If yes:

1. Did you take any action? Why or why not? Describe. ^^

- iii. If not: End interview; the participant should have been previously identified through screening.

^=Common question, such as “How did that make you feel?” that could be asked at multiple points

Demographic Questions

1. What was your role and department in the organization (e.g., HR, Finance, Phlebotomy, Quality Assurance, IT, intellectual property development, management, etc.)?
2. Tenure at the organization?
3. Generational cohort (with the related age ranges)

Traditionalists	1928–1945
Baby Boomers	1946–1964
Generation X	1965–1980
Millennials	1981–1996
Generation Z	1997–2012

4. Level of education

Appendix C: Codebook

Name	Description	Files	References
			188
Colleagues-Ethics	Participants description of their colleagues' ethics with regard to behavior, thoughts, speech, etc.	4	19
Colleagues-Experience, Education	Participants description of their colleagues' level of training, experience, and/or expertise	7	15
Comms About Concerns	Participant's description of communications they made about concerns they had	0	0
With Colleagues	Participant's description of communications with colleagues about concerns	4	7
With Leadership	Participant's description of communications with their leadership about concerns	12	39
With Non-Employees	Participant's description of communications with entities outside of the company regarding concerns	3	8
Experienced Activities	Participant's description of their experiences	0	0
All-Hands Meetings	Participant's description of large corporate meetings with most employees	4	5
Board of Directors	Participant's comments about the board of directors	2	12
Coping Mechanisms	Activities communicated by participants to alleviate the stress associated with the circumstances	6	12
Flat Hierarchy	Participant's reports of the organizational structure of the company	8	18

Name	Description	Files	References
			5
Publicity or Fame	Participant's description of publicity, news, interaction with high-profile or well-known people	3	7
True Believers	Participant's comments about colleagues' level of belief in the mission/vision	7	9
Us vs Them	Participant's description of "us vs. them" or in- and out-group activities, communications, or experiences	3	7
Experienced Emotions	Emotions the Participant report having	0	0
Anger	Participant's expression of anger or emotions related to it, such as frustration, annoyance, hostility, irritation, criticality, hate, or selfishness	3	6
Frustrated	Participant's expression of anger related to frustration	8	11
Insulted or Patronized	Participant's expression of anger from being insulted or patronized. This varies slightly from disgust resulting from insult or patronization	3	5
Anticipation	Participant's expression of anticipation or emotions related to it, such as vigilance, excitement, interest, and optimism	8	15
Disgust	Participant's expression of disgust or emotions related to it, such as loathing, patronization, or skepticism	3	4
Insulted or Patronization	Participant's expression of disgust from being insulted or patronized. This varies slightly from anger resulting from insult or patronization	4	11
Fear	Participant's expression of fear or emotions related to it, such as terror, apprehension, rejection, bewilderment, inadequacy, insignificance, embarrassment, anxiety, insecurity,	7	10

Name	Description	Files	References
Confusion or Conflicts	Participant's description of conflicting thoughts, priorities, or opinions; includes description of dissonance	6	15
Fatigue	Participant's description related to ongoing fear	4	5
Fear of Backlash	Participant's description of potential retribution (not related to potential career impact) resulting in fear	7	22
Fear of Career Impact	Participant's description related to potential negative impact to their career resulting in fear	3	4
Helplessness	Participant's description of fear related to helplessness	7	12
Happiness	Participant's expression of happiness or emotions related to it, such as joy, serenity, energetic, cheerfulness, fascination, stimulation, creativity, and hopefulness	4	7
Sadness		4	11
Betrayal	Participant's expression of sadness due to betrayal	3	4
Disappointment	Participant's expression of sadness due to disappointment	8	12
Surprise	Participant's expression of surprise or emotions related to it, such as relief, amazement, distraction, disbelief, or surrealism	3	10

Name	Description	Files	References
			3
Hiring Practices	Participant's comments about hiring practices or promotion/retention practices	5	26
Justification	Participant's reports of justification for their thoughts, opinions, and actions	0	0
Concern About Backlash	Reasons given that are related to the negative consequences of doing so	8	29
Conflating Product with Vision	Participant's communications about supporting the vision when discussing the product	1	2
Didn't Do Anything Wrong	Participant's assertion that they didn't do anything wrong	4	12
Financial Benefit	The participant's description of motivation by money, stock, or other financial incentive	5	7
It Wasn't That Bad	Participant's description of the issues they knew about not being that concerning	1	2
Nobody Listened Anyway	Participant's comments about not being heard when they commented previously so not trying to communicate concerns later	4	9
Not my Responsibility		4	5
Risk is Understood	Participant's comments related to investors knowing the inherent risks	2	2
Some of it Worked	Participant's description of partial functionality or that it would work eventually even if it wasn't fully functional yet	1	2
Supporting the Goal	Actions supporting the mission for virtuous reasons	2	7

Name	Description	Files	References
			16
Wasn't Asked for my Opinion	Participant's comments that they understood there may have been issues, but they were not asked	1	1
Went Along with the Crowd	Others were doing it too	3	4
Who Would Believe Me	Participant's reports of not being believed for one of several reasons	1	3
Making Sense of it All		5	16
Metaphoric Reference	Participant's reports using metaphors. Often also coded otherwise too	4	13
Mission Thoughts and Opinions	The participant's thought and opinions about the company's mission	9	37
Mission-Behavior Surrounding	Behavior surrounding the mission from participants	8	25
Odd Working Conditions		6	13
Mission-Comms About	How leadership communicated the mission	6	15
Questionable Ethical Experiences		0	0
Legal Activities	Participant's description of the company's legal representation or legal activities	3	11
Other Improper Practices	Participant's description of seemingly improper practices	9	40

Name	Description	Files	References
			18
Hype	Participant's description of their sense-making regarding motivations corporate leaders' decision to rollout before the product was ready.	3	8
Investor Pressure	Justifications related to investors	2	2
Secrecy, Security, Compartmentalization	Participant's comments about secrecy, security, or compartmentalization	0	0
Building Security	Participant's description of building security measures	5	6
CL Security	Participant's description of security of or related to the corporate leaders	3	7
Comms	Participant's description of secrecy, security, or compartmentalization specifically related to communications	7	18
Descriptions	Participant's description of the company related to the secrecy, security, and compartmentalization of departments, people, etc. not otherwise categorized	4	6
Information Siloing	Siloing and segmentation of information.	9	19
It Did Keep People from Knowing the Full Picture	Secrecy, security, and compartmentalization kept everyone from knowing the full extent of problems	6	7
It Didn't Keep People from Knowing the Full Picture	Secrecy, security, and compartmentalization failed to keep everyone from knowing the problems	3	4
Part of Why the Product Failed	Participant's reports that the secrecy, security, compartmentalization ironically contributed to the failure of the product	4	9
Threats	Participant's comments about threats related to secrecy, security, or compartmentalization	3	6

Name	Description	Files	References
			5
Turnover	Participant's description regarding employee turnover through being fired or quitting	8	22
RQ2_Influence Social Identification With Leader	How do the lived experiences of employees in the United States reflect the influence of social identification with a leader during unethical dilemmas in biomedical corporations?	12	86
CLs-Thoughts and Opinions	Thoughts and opinions about CL1 and CL2, the corporate leaders, when they are discussed together rather than separately	1	1
Change Over Time			3
Communications	Participant's description of communications by or with corporate leaders and the influence on their relationships or opinions	3	4
Interactions	Participant's description of interaction with corporate leaders and the influence on their relationships or opinions	2	3
Wider Leadership Group	Participant's description of the wider corporate leadership group (beyond CL1 and CL2).	4	6
Within Context of Mission	Participant's description of corporate leadership in relation to the mission	3	4
Direct Supervisor-Thoughts and Opinions	Thoughts and opinions about their direct supervisor	0	0
Champion for the Team	Participant's reports about direct leadership being a champion for the team's needs	4	5
Connected to DS	Participant's description of connection with their direct supervisor	4	12

Name	Description	Files	References
			11
Leadership Ability	Participant's reports about direct leadership's general leadership abilities	5	9
One of the Team	Participant's reports about direct leadership being "one of the team"	5	5
Protector	Participant's describing direct supervisor as a protector or taking protective actions	3	8
Share Similar Values	Participant's description of sharing values with their direct supervisor	6	14
Structure for Success	Participant's reports about direct leadership creating a structure for team success	3	3
CL1-Thoughts and Opinions	Thoughts and opinions about CL1, the corporate leader	12	60
CL2-Thoughts and Opinions	Thoughts and opinions about CL2, the corporate leader	4	19
Thoughts about CL1's Punishment	Participant's impromptu comments about CL's sentencing	4	6
Other Findings	Participant's results that do not directly align with the RQs.	9	63
Career Impact	Participant's reports of the impact their tenure at the company may have had on their future career, including concerns or considerations	5	9
Changes Subject	Example of an instance when the participant doesn't answer the question they were asked and diverts or changes the subject when asked a specific question.	2	3
Fraud Wasn't During My Tenure	Participant's comments that fraudulent or unethical activity wasn't occurring during their tenure	4	6

Name	Description	Files	References
			2
Start-Up Thoughts and Opinions	Participant's reports about start-up culture or experiences	6	15
Team Experience When Participant is DS		3	15
The Goal was Achievable		6	11

Appendix D: National University IRB Approval



9388 Lightwave Ave.
San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption

August 27, 2025

To: Stacey Novak

Project Title: The Impact of Social Identification with Leadership on Employee Cooperation with Biomedical Corporate Corruption: A Phenomenological Study

NU IRB Number: IRB-FY25-26-58

Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Category 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available; (ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects; (iii) The research involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated under 45 CFR parts 160 and 164, subparts A and E, for the purposes of "health care operations" or "research" as those terms are defined at 45 CFR 164.501 or for "public health activities and purposes" as described under 45 CFR 164.512(b); or (iv) The research is conducted by, or on behalf of, a Federal department or agency using government-generated or government-collected information obtained for nonresearch activities, if the research generates identifiable private information that is or will be maintained on information technology that is subject to and in compliance with section 208(b) of the E-Government Act of 2002, 44 U.S.C. 3501 note, if all of the identifiable private information collected, used, or generated as part of the activity will be maintained in systems of records subject to the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a, and, if applicable, the information used in the research was collected subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, 44 U.S.C. 3501 et seq.

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of August 27, 2025

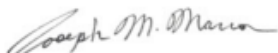
Dear Stacey Novak:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

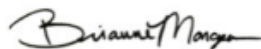
Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,



Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair



Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB



Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB

Appendix E: Consent Form

My name is Stacey Novak, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about employee participation in a corrupt activity at biomedical companies. The name of this research is "The Impact of Social Identification with Leadership on Employee Cooperation with Biomedical Corporate Corruption: A Phenomenological Study."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. You are age 18 or older.
2. You worked for at least 3 months in the United States for a biomedical company
3. You doubted the public claims of that company during your employment
4. You participated in activities that supported fraudulent activities OR you recognized unethical activities of your colleague(s).

I hope to include 10 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview over Teams for approximately 1 hour
2. Review your interview summary via email for approximately 15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- The general role you held at the company
- The approximate length of time you were employed at the company
- Concerns you had about public claims versus actual activity at the company
- Your relationship with your manager and corporate leaders
- Actions you took to support or thwart corrupt activity and how that made you feel

Risks: There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording: I would like to audio/video record your responses with Microsoft Teams video conferencing during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Compensation: After you complete the interview, you will receive a \$40 digital Visa gift card via email.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at *REMOVED FOR DM*.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at *REMOVED FOR DM*.

NU IRB-FY25-26-58

Appendix F: Recruitment Message

Hello!

My name is Stacey Novak, and I'm a doctoral candidate at National University. I'm conducting a research study about employee participation in a corrupt activity at biomedical companies.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all these criteria:

1. You are age 18 or older.
2. You worked for at least 3 months in the United States for a biomedical company
3. You doubted the public claims of that company during your employment
4. You participated in activities that supported fraudulent activities *OR* you recognized unethical activities of your colleague(s).

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview over Teams for approximately 1 hour
2. Review your interview summary via email for approximately 15 minutes

During the interview, you will be asked questions about:

- The general role you held at the company
- The approximate length of time you were employed at the company
- Concerns you had about public claims versus actual activity at the company
- Your relationship with your manager and corporate leaders
- Actions you took to support or thwart corrupt activity and how that made you feel

Participants will receive a \$40 digital Visa gift card via email after the interview.

To participate or ask questions, please contact me at *REMOVED FOR DM*.

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Stacey Novak

NU IRB-FY25-26-58

