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Dark clouds of leadership: causes and consequences of toxic leadership

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ABSTRACT

Despite the preponderance of literature on the dark side of leadership and its consequences for employees and organizations, there remains a need for more research on toxic leadership. Previous research has conceptualized toxic leadership differently, and existing measurement dimensions are not standardized and omit crucial behaviors like power quest, psychopathy, and corruption. Recent studies have shown that toxic leadership—a multifaceted and destructive leadership style characterized by negative managerial techniques—has detrimental consequences on many organizations, societies, and countries. Specifically, employees require ethical leadership to uphold healthy culture, improve psychological well-being, and sustain productivity. To address the lack of theoretical understanding, we present a narrative review that critically examines toxic leadership research to provide a comprehensive catalog using an integrative framework (antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes) and identify three major challenges in this field. First, is toxic leadership effectively conceptualized? Second, is toxic leadership adequately measured, or is the measurement undermined by conceptual ambiguity? Finally, do existing studies provide a sufficient theoretical foundation to understand the causes, consequences, and cascading effects of toxic leadership? We synthesize our recommendations for rethinking the conceptualization, measurement, empirical, and theoretical study of toxic leadership, and propose a theoretical model for further research.

KEYWORDS

Corruption; dark side leadership; measurement dimensions; power; psychopathy; toxic leadership

... when someone in power uses their position to oppress others, it's toxic leadership.

—Simon Sinek (2023)

Introduction

Dysfunctional leadership in corporate organizations (Rasool et al. 2021), governments (Hattab et al. 2022; Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021), and the education sector (Green 2014; Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020) has rekindled an interest in toxic leadership. Toxic leadership refers to leaders who unpredictably exhibit extreme emotions, lack emotional intelligence, are insensitive and self-centered, and employ negative managerial tactics to influence followers (Schmidt 2008). Toxic leaders are inherently destructive to the well-being of humanity (Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad 2010; Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021; Walton 2021b). Although scholars have studied

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leadership (e.g., Alvesson 2020; Lemoine, Hartnell, and Leroy 2019), most social scientists have adopted a one-sided perspective, emphasizing constructive features with less focus on destructive leadership (Harris and Jones 2018). Unfortunately, toxic leadership is a familiar reality in many organizations (Dobbs and Do 2019; Stringer et al. 2023).

A review of the literature on toxic leadership has revealed different conceptualizations and behaviors (Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021; Reed 2004; Watkins and Walker 2021). Despite these conceptualizations, there is yet to be a comprehensive definition of toxic leadership (Emblemsvåg and Emblemsvåg 2023; Gandolfi and Stone 2022). Prior research (e.g., Green 2014; Schmidt 2008) has also demonstrated that existing measurement constructs of toxic leadership have distinct dimensions that have not been standardized across studies despite being developed in the same geographical context and sector. Moreover, the existing measurement constructs lack crucial behaviors of toxic leaders, like power quest, psychopathy, and corruption.

Power is regarded as the root of all evil, and, like a disease, power pollutes everything it touches (Cornwell 2023). Power is frequently associated with the aspirations to oppress, coerce, corrupt, and tyrannize; excessive power can lead to the unethical behaviors of leaders (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; Ghaemi, Liapis, and Owen 2016; James, Bennett, and Blum 2021; Robert 2021; Walton 2021a). Leaders may abuse their position to exploit resources in the workplace (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; Ghaemi, Liapis, and Owen 2016; Walton 2021b). Furthermore, the pursuit of power has been found to lead to corruption—misuse of authority and position—and may trigger toxic leadership (Broomhall 2022; Walton 2021b). Specifically, the power held by leaders in organizational positions has the potential to trigger their latent toxic traits (Walton 2021b). Unethical power exploitation, disregarding the feelings of others, and exploiting for one's own benefit are defining features of psychopathy (Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders 2019). Scholars have emphasized the importance of conducting further research on psychopathy, as it is considered the most destructive toxic personality trait, characterized by severe abusive and unethical leadership (Boddy 2023; Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021).

Specifically, psychopathic traits are voracious, desiring power, status, and financial gain, which motivates individuals to pursue top managerial positions (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; de Vries 2012). Distinctly, toxic leaders exhibit various negative behaviors, contrary to the limited understanding of the leadership style, which has relied heavily on existing measurement constructs that lack these behaviors. Despite extensive research spanning nearly three decades, there are only four measurement constructs for toxic leadership, three of which were developed based on a Western cultural context. Moreover, these constructs have distinct dimensions, despite two of them originating from the same geographical context, and this makes comparative analysis in a cross-cultural context challenging (Labrague et al. 2020). Researchers from non-Western cultures often express concerns regarding the applicability and validity of the Western context toxic leadership measurement (Labrague et al. 2020; Omar and Ahmad 2020).

Although an estimated \$45.5 billion has been spent globally to educate leaders across all levels, numerous statistics have demonstrated that the significant investments have yet to impact critical areas such as employee engagement and public trust (Williams 2022). Moreover, the complexities of the interaction between toxic leaders and employees have not yet been thoroughly uncovered in literature. Indeed, the literature on toxic leadership comprises a remarkably trivial proportion of negative leadership research (Gandolfi and Stone 2022; Labrague 2023).

Currently, the leadership field lacks a comprehensive consensus on the conceptualization of toxic leadership, a cohesive measurement construct, and theoretical frameworks that expound on toxic leadership's emergence, effects, and transmission mechanisms. Moreover, there is a dearth of quantitative research on toxic leadership with theoretical underpinnings (Khan et al. 2021; Rasool et al. 2021; Saleem et al. 2021). Given the lack of a unified definition, measurement constructs that exclude crucial behaviors like power, psychopathy, and corruption, and the paucity of studies with theoretical underpinnings for toxic leadership, this study justifies extensive scholarly research into

toxic leadership. In so doing, this article presents a narrative review—an academic summary that provides interpretation and criticism (Geddes and Lindebaum 2020)—in response to the study limitations, with a focus on the context of employees of toxic leadership and a rethink of three interrelated questions based on the above-mentioned gaps. *First, is toxic leadership properly conceptualized? Second, is toxic leadership optimally measured, or is it hampered by conceptual ambiguity? Finally, do existing studies offer sufficient theoretical foundation for understanding the causes, consequences, and cascading effects of toxic leadership?* Addressing these gaps is important because if the main studies are flawed, then the meta-analyses and narrative research would also be faulty, resulting in erroneous findings and policy recommendations (Fischer et al. 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, we developed a comprehensive integrative framework of toxic leadership that looks at the contextual and leader-specific traits and consequences at three levels. Using this framework, we proposed a theoretical model for future research. Specifically, this article provides theoretical insights illuminating on the growing prevalence of leader toxicity (also referred to as “Covid-Tox” or “C-Tox,” see Walton 2021b), which infiltrates all levels of the organization and poisons susceptible employees due to the lack of a unified definition, comprehensive measurement, and dearth of theoretical research. From a practical standpoint, understanding the factors that encourage or curtail toxicity can assist academic and business sectors to identify toxic leadership, and take preventive measures to manage, reduce the cascading effects, and mitigate the adverse consequences. In conclusion, the literature argues the need to apply more intense theoretical perspectives using applicable theories, mediators, and moderators. The following section describes the method and the rationale for employing a narrative review for the paper.

Method

The decision regarding whether to conduct a narrative or systematic review transcends the technical aspects inherent in each methodology. Concerning the nature and justification of permissible knowledge, the question is epistemological (Geddes and Lindebaum 2020). Systematic reviews are highly regarded due to their ability to mitigate reviewer bias by employing objective and replicable criteria selection and validity evaluation for individual publications (Turnbull, Chugh, and Luck 2023). However, systematic reviews may be deemed weak when strict procedural guidelines hinder their ability to fully evaluate numerous works of literature and identify new connections (Geddes and Lindebaum 2020). As a result, a narrative approach was employed in this article to organize and synthesize prior research (Mertova and Webster 2019). Although research indicates that narrative reviews cover the literature extensively, they lack a clear explanation of the procedures employed to find evidence (Turnbull, Chugh, and Luck 2023). Furthermore, narrative reviews are often criticized for their biased selection of literature and lack of debate on the review process. However, Greenhalgh, Thorne, and Malterud (2018) argued that, despite their bias, narrative reviews can be undertaken using an organized process, allowing for deeper insight, interpretation, and critique. As such, we developed a flow chart for outlining the study process (see [Figure A1](#) in [Appendix](#)).

The narrative approach is a reasonable approach for this study since it taps into the social context and unravels the complexities of interactions, illuminating complex research challenges (Mertova and Webster 2019). Furthermore, the narrative approach was utilized to generate new research questions and identify “future research direction” from literature, rather than searching for generalizable findings (Geddes and Lindebaum 2020). Moreover, it provides a broad assessment of relevant literature (Turnbull, Chugh, and Luck 2023). Our aim is to advance our knowledge of toxic leadership by drawing on a diverse approach to scholarly works rather than a thorough analysis of specific literature.

The current paper is informed by different literature, and the search scope was defined based on a set of criteria using phrases such as “dark side,” “toxic leadership,” “destructive,” “power

and leadership,” “psychopathy,” “leader corruption,” “unethical leadership,” and “dysfunctional leadership”; published between 1996 (because toxicity was associated with leadership in 1996) and 2024; written in English; based on disciplines; research findings of qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or descriptive reviews. A researcher was involved in the literature search. “Toxic leadership” was used to perform a basic search for relevant journals on the web of Google Scholar and Wiley between 1996 and 2024. The search yielded 47,251 articles. Then, the above-mentioned phrases were used in pairs to search fields like titles, keywords, and publication abstracts, yielding 14,992 articles. Following a screening process to exclusively select review articles, 465 articles were obtained. We then selected based on disciplines (e.g., business, management, leadership, psychology, health) and relevance to the study topic (including studies that employed Schmidt’s (2008) measurement construct) to narrow the scope, yielding 226 articles.

Abstracts and relevant publications were thoroughly evaluated for each search to ensure the relevance and quality of published works. This process reduced the relevant journal articles to 37 papers. After reading the papers, the snowballing method was applied to identify additional relevant literature by reviewing the reference lists of included papers. Relevant papers were examined to identify additional articles until no new articles were found. In total, 44 papers were identified for detailed analysis (see [Figure A1 in Appendix](#)). In sum, we conducted a comprehensive search for papers using multiple databases, analyzed abstracts and content, and employed the snowball technique. Importantly, we sought publications that could shed light on toxic leadership conceptualization, measurement construct, behaviors/traits, causes, and consequences. In the next section, we provide a critical review of toxic leadership conceptualization.

Conceptualizing toxic leadership

The term “toxicity” was first associated with leadership by Whicker (1996), who coined the phrase “toxic leadership.” Whicker (1996) described toxic leadership as damaging leadership behaviors that destroy employees. Schmidt (2008) referred to toxic leadership as leaders who show intense emotions in an unpredictable manner, lack emotional intelligence, are insensitive and self-interested, using negative managerial tactics to influence followers. Watkins and Walker (2021) described toxic leadership as value-less leaders who rise to authoritative positions due to certain accompanying leadership traits and narcissistic personalities. Undoubtedly, toxic leaders exhibit various negative behaviors that are essential in developing and maintaining a toxic workplace (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). As demonstrated in [Table 1](#), toxic leadership has been conceptualized (i.e., how scholars think about toxic leadership) in diverse ways, with insights derived from different foci (Emblemsvåg and Emblemsvåg 2023). Consequently, it is reasonable to posit that there is a lack of clarity.

Across the various conceptualizations of toxic leadership, there is yet to be a comprehensive definition (Emblemsvåg and Emblemsvåg 2023; Gandolfi and Stone 2022), though the concepts refer to crucial harmful behaviors. For example, Schmidt’s (2008) definition was formulated using observable leader behaviors within the U.S. multi-sector, rather than a retrospective analysis of the effects of leaders on employees. Furthermore, toxic leadership, as Green (2014) described pertains to impairment of workplace effectiveness by individuals with direct or indirect responsibility. This definition was centered on leader behavior and its consequences for the organization, not employee perspectives. Importantly, Green’s (2014) definition was founded on 18 toxic leadership behaviors and then reduced to four behaviors within the U.S. education sector.

In contrast, Watkins and Walker’s (2021) toxic leadership definition was based on employee perceptions of toxic leaders as opposed to leader behaviors or organizational consequences. Specifically, their definition was based on the lived experiences of 130 employees of toxic leaders in the United States, which yielded 30 subtypes behaviors but narrowed to six toxic leadership behaviors. A follow-up study by Abdulai (2021) employed thematic analysis to define toxic

Table 1. Representative definitions of toxic leadership and core behaviors.

Authors	Definitions	Fundamental behaviors	Context/sector/country
Whicker (1996)	Toxic leaders are fundamentally characterized by three dysfunctional qualities: deep-seated inadequacy, selfish values, and deceptiveness. (p. 53)	Engrained inadequacy, self-centered, deceptive, malevolent, malicious, malcontent, and maladjusted.	United States of America
Reed (2004)	A toxic leader is a poison to the unit—an insidious, slow-acting poison that complicates diagnosis and the application of an antidote. (p. 71)	Poisonous, abusive, petty, self-aggrandizing, self-interest, interpersonally malicious, demotivational	United States Army
Lipman-Blumen (2005)	Toxic leaders are those individuals who, by dint of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal qualities, generate a severe and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead. (p. 29)	Destructive, dysfunctional, poisonous, inconsistent/varying (vacillating), grandiose behaviors	United States of America
Walton (2007)	Toxic leadership is defined here as behavior that is exploitive, abusive, destructive, and psychologically—and perhaps legalistically—corrupt and poisonous. (p. 20)	Destructive, abusive, exploitive, poisonous, dysfunctional, bullying, harassment, deception.	United Kingdom
Schmidt (2008)	Toxic leaders as those who display a wide range of extreme emotions in an unpredictable pattern; lack emotional intelligence; act in ways that are culturally and/or interpersonally insensitive; are primarily motivated by self-interest; and influence others by employing negative managerial techniques. (p. 86)	Unpredictable/vacillating pattern, abusive, insensitive, self-promotion, authoritarian, narcissistic, micro-managers, bully, berate employees, self-interest, unprofessional behaviors.	United States Military (qualitative), United States Multi-sector
Green (2014)	A toxic leader is any person who, as a manager, supervisor, or executive, impairs the effectiveness of the organization (or unit) over which they have direct or indirect responsibility. It helps to understand “toxic leadership” by recalling the definition of a “toxin”—an agent that does systemic harm when introduced to a system. (p. 24)	Egotism, ethical failure, incompetent, neuroticism, systemic harm, unpredictable mood, micro-managers, narcissistic, arrogant, bully, bipolar, power quest, corrupt, manipulative, absentee, intemperate	United States Education sector
Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020)	Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. (p. 539)	Destructive, self-centered, unhealthy environmental state, bullying and incivility exacerbated by environmental conditions.	Education sector
Mergen and Ozbilgin (2021)	Toxic leaders create severe and enduring harm by engaging in “destructive behaviors” and exhibiting “dysfunctional characteristics.” (p. 49)	Destructive, dysfunctional, cloud the truth, incompetent, corrupt, promote cronyism, demean (humiliate), intimidate, marginalize employees	Qualitative
Watkins and Walker (2021)	Toxic leadership is a phenomenon sanctioned by the organization, perpetuated by the toxic leader, and lived by the oppressed employee. (p. 10)	Aberrant, abuse of power, egocentrism, emotional dysregulation, ineffective, oppress employees, destructive, selfish orientation, emotional volatility (vacillate), exploitative	United States
Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick (2021)	Toxic personalities are experts in political, influencing and manipulation skills	Sub-clinical psychopaths, ruthless, abuse of power, destructive, desire for power (lust), money, prestige, narcissistic.	United Kingdom

(continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Authors	Definitions	Fundamental behaviors	Context/sector/country
Abdulai (2021)	Toxic leaders are leaders that engage in egoistic behaviors, and consciously influence their employees to believe that their selfish behaviors are normal and accepted.	Egoistic, selfishness, nepotism, clientelism, abuse of power	Sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana
Gandolfi and Stone (2022)	Toxic leadership is the intentional or unintentional series of acts that undermine and discourage those employees who genuinely seek to carry out the mission and vision of the organization, who then become stifled in the process of achievement by self-serving leaders who put mission or personal gain above the needs of employees, creating a demoralized state that deteriorates organizations from the inside out. (p. 25)	Undermine employees, self-serving, deliberate deterioration of the organization, dysfunctional, destructive, abusive, controlling, narcissistic.	United States
Stringer et al. (2023)	A toxic leader is an individual who utilizes negative, hostile, or destructive techniques or tactics that systematically degrade Air Force organizational objectives, readiness, climate, and/or unit morale. Toxic leaders display a host of counterproductive management and motivation styles; examples include and are not limited to fear, ridicule, belittling, bullying, and/or misplaced or unwelcome sarcasm. (p. 33)	Hostile, destructive, instill fear, ridicule, belittle, bully, sarcasm	United States Airforce

leadership from the sub-Saharan African viewpoints, focusing on the social construction of toxic leadership rather than prior researchers' viewpoints. Abdulai (2021) argued that leadership is a social construct that involves the interaction of a leader and an employee. Consequently, toxic leadership must be understood from a social process standpoint. Evidently, existing toxic leadership definitions have distinct behaviors and were developed using different perspectives. Indeed, toxic leaders' repertoires vary across a wide spectrum of toxic behaviors, from moderate, inadvertent toxicity to outright depravity, including traits such as dishonesty (psychopathic), exploitation, and unethical actions (Babiak 1995; Boddy 2023; Kahn and Rouse 2021). This contrasts with Schmidt's (2014) study which argued that toxic leadership encompasses a limited range of behaviors.

Our review shows that numerous scholars have sought to define toxic leadership since its inception, relying on different fundamental behaviors, a few geographical sectors (military, education), and the Western geographical context, except for a study undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana; see Abdulai 2021). Yet, these definitions have yet to be unified. A comprehensive approach to assessing the fundamental behaviors of toxic leadership and developing a clear and cohesive definition would prevent being confused with other negative leadership styles, improve its understanding, and help identify and weed out toxic leaders before they harm employees and the organization (Roza 2024).

A review of Air Force suicide deaths in 2020, for example, found that the deceased experienced significant stress due to toxic leadership, which was attributed to organizations' failure to effectively define toxic leadership and address its widespread concern (Roza 2024). Arguably, this occurrence could have been mitigated had toxic leadership been clearly defined and recognizable. The lack of a clear and unified definition of toxic leadership has resulted in it being subjectively defined by others' perspectives and influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts (Stringer et al. 2023).

Moreover, the absence of a unified definition that encompasses the fundamental behaviors of toxic leadership (see Table 1) could impede efforts to develop a cohesive strategy to combat toxic leadership in organizations (Stringer et al. 2023). Providing a comprehensive and universally applicable definition of toxic leadership is crucial to avert the alarming rise of toxic leadership in organizations and mitigate its negative consequences. Additionally, the existence of different definitions could result in muddled conceptualizations, resulting in inaccurate measurements and empirical estimates (Fischer et al. 2021), which we will discuss next.

Operationalizing toxic leadership and measurement dimensions

Beyond the proliferation of definitions of toxic leadership, existing research has applied a few measurement scales to operationalize toxic leadership. Table 2 shows the existing measurement scales, toxic leadership dimensions, and their corresponding fundamental traits and behaviors. Unarguably, toxic leadership has been conceptualized in various forms, including abusive

Table 2. Dimensions of toxic leadership behavior.

Toxic leadership dimension	Author	Country/sector
Intemperate behavior, narcissism, self-promotion, humiliating behavior	Labrague et al. (2020)	Philippines Health sector
Unappreciativeness, utilitarian, egoistic, psychological dysfunction	Çelebi, Güner, and Yildiz (2015)	Turkey Education sector
Egotism (self-centered), ethical failure, incompetence, neuroticism (wild mood changes)	Green (2014)	United States Education sector
Abusive, narcissism, self-promotion, authoritarian, unpredictable (vacillating)	Schmidt (2008)	United States Military & multi-sector (including education)

Notes: This table illustrates the various dimensions of toxic leadership and the authors who derived the dimensions. The details show that Schmidt (2008) classified toxic leadership into five different dimensions, while Green's (2014), Çelebi, Güner, and Yildiz's (2015), and Labrague et al.'s (2020) classifications were based on four different dimensions.

supervision (Reed 2004; Schmidt 2008), destructive leadership (Lipman-Blumen 2005; Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020), maladjusted behaviors (Whicker 1996), exploitive behaviors (Walton 2021b), unpredictable/vacillating leadership, authoritarian leadership (Schmidt 2008, 2014), egotism (Van Gerven et al. 2022), dysfunctional leadership (Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021), psychopathy (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021), and self-serving behavior (Gandolfi and Stone 2022).

Schmidt (2008, 2014) conducted a mixed study using U.S. military and multi-sector participants to develop a toxic leadership scale. Using this approach, he pared down the diverse notions to construct a five-dimensional measurement of toxic leadership: abusive supervision, self-promotion, narcissism, authoritarianism, and unpredictable/vacillating leadership. Green (2014) agreed with Schmidt's construct but argued that the construct lacked the unethical perspective of toxic leadership. As a result, Green (2014) carried out a mixed study involving education sector participants in the United States and responded with a four-dimensional measurement centered on egotism, ethical failure, leader incompetence, and neuroticism. In a quantitative study conducted in Turkey's education sector, Çelebi, Güner, and Yildiz (2015) expanded toxic leadership psychological and emotional dysfunction behaviors and developed a four-dimensional pattern of unappreciativeness, utilitarian, egoistic, and psychological dysfunction.

In contrast, Labrague et al. (2020) identified a dearth of empirical research on toxic leadership in the health sector. Thus, they conducted a mixed study in the Philippines' private and public health sectors, developing a four-dimensional measurement centered on intemperate behavior, narcissism, self-promotion, and humiliating behavior to develop a psychometric scale for toxic leadership behavior of nursing managers (ToxBH-NM). Cakiroglu and Unver (2023) psychometrically examined ToxBH-NM's validity (validity index: 0.88, average variance extracted: 0.59–0.83; composite reliability: 0.91–0.96). Table 2 shows the toxic leadership dimensional distinctions by the different scholars.

The dimensional perspectives share minor similarities. For example, Green's (2014) "incompetence" dimension is related to Schmidt's (2008) "unpredictable/vacillating" behavior, both of which indicate self-centeredness. Furthermore, Labrague et al. (2020) and Schmidt's (2008) measurements revealed similarities in narcissism and self-promotion behaviors. Our review revealed that Schmidt's (2008) measurement is the most frequently used in literature, and this aligns with Labrague's (2023) systematic review. Based on the foregoing, it is evident that each of the four measurements exhibits distinct behaviors and meanings that are not interchangeable. Moreover, Green's (2014) four-dimensional perception differs from Schmidt's (2008) five-dimensional viewpoint, despite both studies being conducted in the same geographical region (i.e., United States) and sector (education).

Toxic leaders clearly demonstrate a range of negative behaviors (Stringer et al. 2023). Toxic leadership is not simply a few negative behaviors but rather a multifaceted phenomenon, yet studies to date have relied heavily on these dimensional distinctions and scales. For example, the systematic review of Labrague (2023) on toxic leadership revealed that Schmidt's (2008) toxic leadership scale was the most used to assess nurse managers in the health sector. A comparison of Schmidt's (2008) dimensional construct with Labrague et al.'s nursing measurement showed only two similarities in toxic behaviors: narcissism and self-promotion. Given that Schmidt's (2008) scale was tested outside of the health sector and considering the prevalence of toxic leadership in the health sector, it is evident that the comparative analysis would be distinct. This supports the research question regarding the efficacy of existing toxic leadership measurement and justifies the need for a standardized measurement that considers all the fundamental toxic leadership behaviors across different sectors and geographical spheres. Taken together, it may be reasonable to conclude that the distinctiveness of each measurement construct would render them unsuitable for application across multiple sectors since they do not consider the comprehensive fundamental toxic behaviors of all sectors. As such, this poses a huge challenge in existing literature, which has heavily relied on Schmidt's (2008) measurement in multiple sectors (Acuña and

Male 2024; Labrague 2023). Additionally, inaccurate measurements may explain the prevalence of toxic leadership within organizations.

Empirical research on toxic leadership

The underlying principle of toxic leadership is that it weakens morale, commitment, motivation, effectiveness, and alignment with workplace goals (Acuña and Male 2024; Sippio 2023), which are the hallmarks of successful and sustainable leadership (Boddy 2023). For example, Acuña and Male (2024) found a negative relationship between toxic leadership, employee job satisfaction, and organizational commitment within Chilean tertiary education. Their findings revealed that 40% of academics polled at the two study universities reported experiencing toxic leadership, out of the 30% of respondents. Using Schmidt's (2008) toxic leadership scale, Acuña and Male (2024) also discovered that certain dimensions had a greater impact than others, with full-time professors experiencing self-promotion and narcissism, while part-time academics experienced unpredictability and authoritarian leadership. However, Orunbon and Ibikunle (2023) found no significant relationship between toxic leadership, teachers' hostility, and withdrawal behavior within the Nigerian education sector.

In contrast, Paltu and Brouwers (2020) found a positive relationship between toxic leadership, turnover intention, and extrinsic job satisfaction among South African manufacturing sector workers, particularly for the authoritarian and abusive supervision dimensions. However, the relationship with organizational commitment was negative. A study conducted by Rasool et al. (2021) in small and medium-sized enterprises in China revealed a negative relationship between toxic leadership, employee engagement, and organizational support, using a three-dimensional (harassment, bullying, ostracism) scale.

Unarguably, toxic leaders employ intimidating strategies and intentionally abuse power to convey to employees they are replaceable (Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021), creating a climate of fear that discourages employees from challenging their authority and destructive behaviors (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). While this strategy may initially drive employees to work harder to retain their jobs, productivity will eventually decline due to its adverse effect on employees' morale and well-being (Dobbs and Do 2019; Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020).

Sippio's (2023) experiential interaction with a toxic leader, for example, left him bewildered and often "felt like [he] was working in a maze with no visible exit." His encounter led to the identification of five toxic leadership behaviors: derailment, destructive, tyrannical, supportive-disloyal, and laissez-faire, which might potentially destroy employees through the toxic leader's power quest.

Power, corruption, and psychopathy

Power corrupts leaders and allows them to break rules and harness workplace resources (Sippio 2023). Power is the birth of toxic leadership when driven by a negative motive (Spain, Harms, and LeBreton 2014). When a leader's desire to harm others is responsible for directing the power drive into behavior, the leadership style becomes toxic (James, Bennett, and Blum 2021). High-aggression, power-hungry leaders tend to pursue and utilize power in ways damaging to employees and organizations, making them toxic (James, Bennett, and Blum 2021; Sippio 2023). Employees under such leaders will struggle to thrive because toxic leaders are self-serving, which impacts employees' morale and overall productivity (Dobbs and Do 2019; Perry 2021). Specifically, toxic leaders exert power by reducing employees' ability to respond appropriately, through cognitive paralysis (Boddy Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). In organizations, scholars such as Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick (2021) and Walton (2021b) compellingly argued that leaders set behavioral norms for subordinates to follow. If top leaders exhibit toxic leadership behaviors, it

may become the norm for the organization's culture. Importantly, the excessive power of toxic leaders (which can exacerbate the narcissistic, envious, and hubristic traits) has the potential to disrupt workplace status quo, leading to chaos and damaging the organizational culture (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020; Walton 2021a; Watkins and Walker 2021). When such disruptions occur, they produce shock-waves, uncertainty, and confusion in the workplace (Lee, Sim, and Tuckey 2024); such changes in internal culture further enhance the likelihood of others exhibiting toxic behaviors (Walton 2021a).

The persistent exercise of power has been linked to corruption (James, Bennett, and Blum 2021; Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023). Corruption erodes and corrodes organizational well-being, as evidenced by the continued emergence of societal problems that exacerbate existing complex issues (Broomhall 2022). As with any toxic substance, just a small amount is required to inflict significant harm. Therefore, toxicity at the highest level can quickly trickle down and result in extensive damage to employees (Broomhall 2022; Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023). Importantly, corruption occurs because of the permissive nature of organizations, orchestrated by those in power. Leaders can become toxic due to the resources and power bestowed upon them; when confronted, less powerful mid-level supervisors/employees often retreat or align with the toxic leaders, becoming powerful and potentially corrupt. Watkins and Walker (2021) identified power and corruption as fundamental toxic leadership behaviors. They associated power with abuse of position and degradation, while corruption was linked to instilling fear, systemic oppression, threats, discrimination, and unethical behaviors. However, neither behavior has yet been quantitatively or theoretically tested nor included in the toxic measurement construct.

Remarkably, evidence also indicates that certain personality qualities often linked with psychopathy contribute to the growth of toxic leaders (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; Straight 2023). Research has shown that psychopathy is the most toxic personality trait (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). Psychopathic traits (e.g., corporate, systemic, subclinical, industrial) have been associated with prototypical toxic leadership (Boddy 2023; Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). Psychopaths, who constitute an estimated 1% of the general populace, are individuals who appear charming but are completely ruthless, devoid of emotion and empathy (Babiak 1995; Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; Walton 2021b). Importantly, corporate psychopaths and corporate psychopathy, which manifest as toxic leadership and governance, pose significant obstacles to attaining sustainability (Boddy 2023). Similarly, irrespective of their skills, subclinical psychopathic leaders make weak investment decisions and have been linked to severe bullying (psychopath lite, see de Vries 2012), lower organizational success, and shareholder capital (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). For example, in a particular case study conducted by Boddy (2017) in the UK, the CEO was described as a toxic leader in numerous ways that suggested psychopathy, with leadership abilities lacking, leaving employees aimless and leaderless. Importantly, a significant factor contributing to the rise of toxic leaders with psychopathic traits in organizations is their ability to portray charismatic charm (makes it easier to obtain support and leadership positions), manipulate, and prioritize individual benefits over employee welfare (Boddy 2023; Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021; Straight 2023). The power of charisma is undeniably corrupt (Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023).

Unfortunately, unlike COVID-19, toxic leadership behaviors appear difficult to curtail because of the power conferred upon toxic leaders and their ability to enhance or hinder employees' career progression (Rasool et al. 2021; Sippio 2023). However, disproportionate lucrative severance pay-outs (i.e., golden parachute) and other rewards may co-opt individuals into corrupt practices and encourage the allure of toxicity (Walton 2021b). These attractions have contributed to the willingness of ambitious leaders to break ethical standards, exploit employees, and impose coercive measures to advance personal aspirations and increase benefits (Walton 2021b). For example, FTSE CEOs in the UK earn 117 times more than the typical full-time employee, and this excessive privilege can contribute to executive toxic behaviors (Walton 2021b).

Evidently, the fundamental behaviors of toxic leadership have been overlooked in existing measurement constructs despite their importance. To ensure that toxic leadership is accurately measured, it is critical to thoroughly examine the above-mentioned fundamental behaviors (power quest, corruption, and psychopathy) that result in the emergence of toxic leaders, along with other fundamental toxic behaviors (see [Table 1](#)). These behaviors must be incorporated into a newly developed standardized measurement. [Table 3](#) depicts a summary of past studies on toxic leadership, mediators, moderators, theories applied, and the geographical context.

In sum, while it is crucial to assess the suitability of each study based on the objectives and study environment, summary statistics can provide an overview of toxic leadership. The results revealed that most of the prior studies were qualitative ($n=20$; 14 were descriptive articles) in nature, with no theoretical underpinnings, and were primarily developed in the Western clime ($n=14$), a few in developing countries ($n=4$), and others were unknown. Furthermore, eleven of the quantitative studies ($n=16$) had theoretical underpinnings, used few mediators ($n=14$) and moderators ($n=4$), were mostly cross-sectional ($n=13$), one-time-lag, and were conducted in developing countries. The mixed method studies ($n=6$) employed no theories, mediators, or moderators, and emanated from Western culture and developing economies. Unarguably, existing research on toxic leadership has limited empirical and theoretical underpinnings ([Labrague 2023](#)). A strong theoretical framework is essential for toxic leadership research, as it functions as a cornerstone and provides researchers with direction in analyzing data and interpreting results ([Labrague 2023](#)).

Antecedents of toxic leadership

Contextual factors

Lucas ([2021](#)) identified two main components that breed toxic leadership in organizations—vulnerable employees and a corporate culture that permits damaging behaviors to flourish and become pervasive. Walton ([2021a](#)) discovered through a three-legged interrogative framework that toxicity stems from internal and external factors that impact executives' successes and achievements. Walton's study revealed that while a leader's personality is crucial, toxic leadership is often caused by more than just an executive's personality but also by the organization and inducements and perks, and a combination of any two of these factors could curtail the emergence of C-Tox in organizations ([Walton 2021b](#)). Toxic leaders, by nature, generally abuse power to the disadvantage of employees, and the corrosive influence of organizational power, together with financial incentives, should not be ignored ([Walton 2021b](#)). This is because wherever power, status, or financial incentives are at stake, psychopaths will be present ([de Vries 2012](#)).

On the other hand, Mehta and Maheshwari ([2014](#)) suggested that the workplace can become a breeding ground for toxic behaviors if leaders disseminate toxins via counterproductive policies and practices (such as blame culture, unattainable goals, and internal competition; see [Lipman-Blumen 2005](#)). The lack of reporting mechanisms for toxic leadership and the opaque and sluggish approach to addressing concerns allow toxic leaders to fester. Importantly, toxic leaders require employees, and while some employees (altruistic ones who comply with toxic leaders out of fear) are incapable of confronting them and instead flee, others become eager enablers (ego-centric, who collude with toxic leaders). The former feel powerless due to a breach of trust and may be afraid to retaliate against the toxic leader's negative actions ([Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021](#)). Contrarily, the latter may willingly assist the toxic leader and become toxic themselves (via the trickle-down effect) due to personal ambition ([Rice et al. 2021](#)).

Following social learning theory ([Bandura 1986](#)), certain employees may perceive toxic leaders as role models and imitate their behaviors due to power and status ([Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021](#)). From the learning viewpoint, Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño ([2023](#)) explained that such employees take cues from toxic leaders by imitating their behavioral norms. Such spillover effects



Table 3. Past studies on toxic leadership, variables, and theories applied.

	Level	Method	Theory	Outcome variables	Mediator(m)/moderator(z)	Country
Whicker (1996)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	-	-	United States
Reed (2004)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	-	-	United States Army
Lipman-Blumen (2005)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	-	-	United States
Appelbaum and Roy-Girard (2007)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	Organizational performance, deviant behaviors	-	Canada
Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	-	-	United States
Schmidt (2008)	Individual	Mixed	-	-	-	United States military, multi-sector
Tavanti (2011)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	Turnover	-	United States
Pelletier (2012)	Individual	Experiment	Social identity theory, leader-member exchange	-	-	United States
Mehra and Maheshwari (2014)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	Individual and organizational performance	-	India
Green (2014)	Individual	Mixed	-	-	-	United States
Schmidt (2014)	Group	Quantitative	Conservation of resources	Job satisfaction, productivity, organizational trust, and commitment	Group cohesion (m)	United States military
Çelebi, Güner, and Yildiz (2015)	Individual	-	-	-	-	Turkey
Webster, Brough, and Daly (2016)	Individual	Mixed	-	Employee well-being	-	Australia, New Zealand
Yavas (2016)	Individual	Quantitative	-	-	-	Turkey
Burns (2017)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	Workplace deviance, sabotage, performance	-	United States
Karthikeyan (2017)	Article (descriptive)	Qualitative	-	-	-	United States
Omar et al. (2017)	Individual	Mixed method	-	Employee performance, antisocial behavior, emotional disturbance	-	Malaysia
Anjum et al. (2018)	Individual	Quantitative	-	Employee job productivity	Job burnout (m)	Pakistan
Dobbs and Do (2019)	Individual	Mixed method	-	Organizational cynicism (gender, race, and experience)	-	United States Air Force Academy
Naeem and Khurram (2020)	Individual	Quantitative	Psychological contract theory, social exchange theory	Turnover intention	Psychological well-being (m), employee engagement (m)	Pakistan

Table 3. Continued.

	Level	Method	Theory	Outcome variables	Mediator(m) /moderator(z)	Country
Boddy (2023)	Article	Qualitative	-	-	-	United Kingdom
Cakiroglu and Unver (2023)	Individual	Quantitative	-	Work engagement	Mental well-being (m)	Turkey
Orunbon and Ibikunle (2023)	Individual	Quantitative	-	Workplace incivility	-	Nigeria
Lee, Sim, and Tuckey (2024)	Team	Quantitative	Social information processing theory	Job performance	Work engagement (m), job insecurity (m), and role ambiguity (m)	Malaysia
Alsadaan and Alqahtani (2024)	Individual	Quantitative	-	Organizational commitment	Conflict management (m)	Saudi Arabia

from leaders to employees' deviance undoubtedly result in substantial organizational costs and shrinking firm profitability (Labrague et al. 2020). Furthermore, evidence revealed that toxic leaders' damaging imitations emerge from critical role models in their childhood, with the underlying root cause being a carryover from violent parental upbringing (Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023). Additionally, Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) linked toxic leadership to the ideology of hate, arguing that confident leaders who experienced hardship during childhood often grow up to direct self-hatred toward others.

Abdulai (2021), employing an African lens, identified nepotism, inadequate leadership development, clientelism, cultural norm of respecting the elderly, and the belief that it is inappropriate for employees to criticize leaders as the primary causes of toxic leadership in his case studies of thirty-five private and public sector leaders in sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana). Favoritism and nepotism were particularly prevalent in selecting organizational leaders, with individuals often chosen based on political affiliations, family ties, or ethnicity, rather than qualifications or experience. Consequently, most public officeholders exhibit toxic behaviors toward employees and the institution. Importantly, the cultural norm of respecting elders and the belief that criticizing those in authority is culturally impolite create a structurally toxic environment for employees.

While cross-cultural effects have received minimal attention, Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño (2023) argued that some cultural norms permit harmful behaviors between leaders and employees. Certain parts of the world, particularly Africa, are home to groups that find it normal for leaders to engage in unethical behaviors like corruption (Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023). According to such an inference, cultural differences explain why unethical leader behaviors (e.g., toxic) are more common in Asia and Africa than in the United States (Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023). Notably, antecedents of toxic leadership are not simply contextual but also stem from leader-self factors detailed below.

Leader-self factors

For nearly three decades, researchers have zeroed in on toxic leadership because of the effect of the resultant destructive behaviors on employees and organizations (Hogan et al. 2021; Walker and Watkins 2020). Scholars like Singh, Sengupta, and Dev (2019) and Walton (2021b) argued that power, status, position, and influence are crucial antecedents of toxic leadership. Notably, trivial challenges to a toxic leader's freedom of action might be interpreted as a danger to their psychological survival and security, resulting in fierce defensive reactions (Walton 2021a). Anxiety over losing power may be sufficient to instigate toxic behavior that is entirely disproportionate to the planned magnitude of change (Walton 2021b). For example, Hogan et al. (2021) found that toxic behaviors reflect latent cognitive techniques for coping with anxiety and promoting one's goal, typically through manipulating employees. Such strategies may result in short-term gains but will lead to severe long-term costs.

Other studies (e.g., Dobbs and Do 2019; Walker and Watkins 2020) linked toxic leadership to the experience of severe psychological difficulties (like paranoia, low self-esteem, low confidence, and lack of trust in employees) or prior exposure to toxic leaders (thus having a distorted perspective and believing the toxic leadership approach is best). Furthermore, research suggests that some leaders become toxic to remain relevant since evolution is regarded as a competitive game, where the winners emerge by outscoring competitors and employees (Mehta and Maheshwari 2014). Such reactions raise the question of what might be so crucial about preserving one's position, status, and power in the first place and why any changes would be significant.

Toxic leadership has also been associated with leader incompetence because they are promoted above their actual abilities (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). For example, Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020) linked leader incompetence to toxic leadership, arguing that employees perceived as competent are viewed as threats and are quickly marginalized within organizations. Toxic leaders implement such tactics because communication with employees is typically

unidirectional, and more trust is required from employees. However, an atmosphere where toxic leadership permeates has been associated with long-term burnout that impedes employee career aspirations, increases absenteeism, and curtails workplace productivity (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020). Once these patterns become apparent, workplace efficiency deteriorates and causes financial and human capital losses due to low morale and increased employee turnover (Watkins and Walker 2021). In turn, low morale leads to other long-term devastating circumstances such as distrust, anger, hatred, career stagnation, diminished confidence, and poor mental and physical health (Watkins and Walker 2021).

In contrast, Hogan et al. (2021) connected absentee leaders to toxic leadership. They argued that employees of such leaders become stressed due to the need for more clarity regarding performance targets and expectations, as workplace bullying, conflict, and other aggressive behaviors are overlooked. The findings of Hogan et al. (2021) revealed that spotting absentee leaders is complex because they typically operate below the radar and avoid causing serious issues. Of note is that a leader’s behavior may not be the only contributory factor to toxic leadership, but it is a substantial contributor because a leader’s behavior-in-context is crucial for the development and persistence of toxic behavior in organizations (Walton 2021b). Toxic leadership is, indeed, a “Covid-Tox” virus, infecting all spheres of organizations (Walton 2021b). An in-depth review of the consequences of toxic leadership is discussed in the subsequent section.

Consequences of toxic leadership

Various consequences of toxic leadership have been explored, including studies examining its impact on employee behaviors. The consequences encompass a broad range of undesirable outcomes (e.g., turnover intention, employee deviance, emotional disturbance, and psychological distress; see Table 3). Based on the effect level, the outcome variables in Table 3 were categorized into three levels: organizational, group, and follower (see Figure 1). We then categorized the

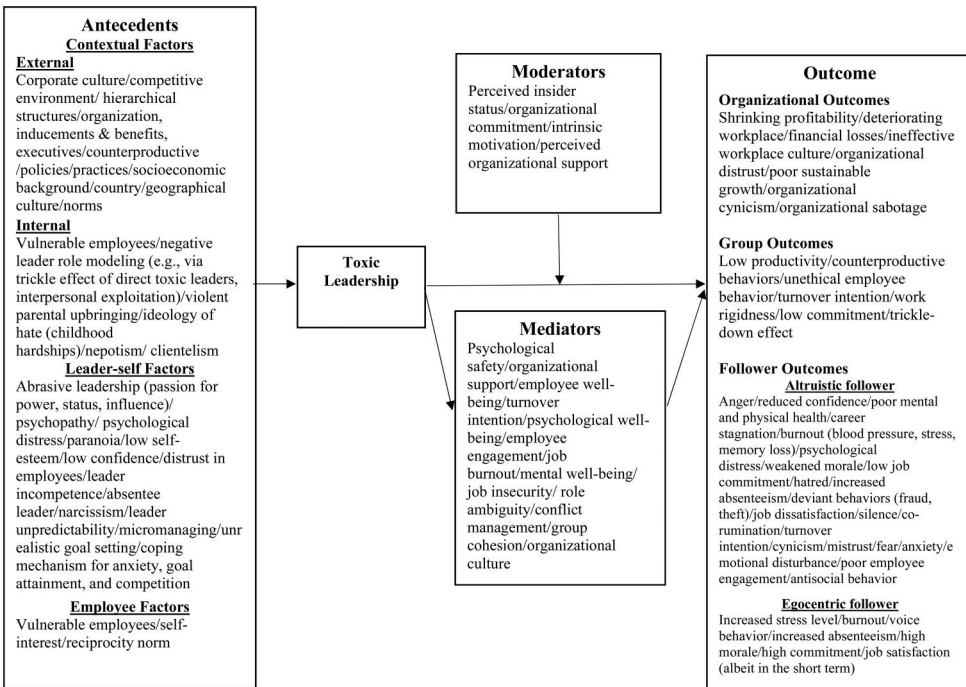


Figure 1. An integrative framework of toxic leadership.

follower outcomes based on their motive: altruistic or egocentric. Prior research has shown that toxic leadership at the organizational level is negatively related to organizational commitment (Paltu and Brouwers 2020; Schmidt 2014), organizational support (Rasool et al. 2021), and positively associated with organizational cynicism (Dobbs and Do 2019). Particularly, organizational cynicism significantly contributes to employee burnout, emotional tiredness, and turnover, while also directly diminishing organizational citizenship behavior, commitment, and effectiveness (Dobbs and Do 2019).

Analyzing the dynamics of these relationships revealed that toxic leadership is indeed a universal and detrimental phenomenon. For example, toxic leadership was negatively associated with job performance (Lee, Sim, and Tuckey 2024), job satisfaction (Schmidt 2014), psychological safety (Khan et al. 2021), and employee mental well-being (Cakiroglu and Unver 2023). Furthermore, Rasool et al. (2021) found a negative relationship between toxic leadership and employee engagement, suggesting that employees are more inclined to express negative feelings with colleagues in a toxic environment. Negative feelings in a toxic atmosphere result in increased stress and anxiety levels. At these levels, affected employees may exhibit aggressive behaviors toward others (family, friends, or colleagues) or withdraw from communicating, indicating a cascading effect and a larger adverse effect on employee's well-being.

Importantly, a toxic environment saturated with intense work demands and pressure would result in heightened stress (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023; Rasool et al. 2021). The potential long-term consequences of stress could lead to mental health problems like burnout, depression (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023), post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide (Porath 2015; Roza 2024). Essentially, stress impacts human physiology, altering heart rate, hormone levels, and blood circulation, and may result in cardiovascular diseases (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023). For example, psychosocial stressors such as job strain have been associated with a 1.2 to 1.3 times higher risk of coronary heart disease (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023). Research also suggests that employees experiencing workplace stress had a 1.1 to 1.6 times increased risk of developing coronary heart disease or stroke compared to those without stress (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023). Research also indicates that toxic leadership results in job stress costs of over \$300 billion yearly in the United States (Pfeffer 2018).

A further review of employees' evaluation of toxic leadership revealed a positive association with undesirable outcomes such as psychological distress (Omar and Ahmad 2020), counterproductive work behavior (Hattab et al. 2022), emotional exhaustion (Koç et al. 2022) and turnover intentions (Hattab et al. 2022; Paltu and Brouwers 2020). According to Gallup, nearly 60% of employees left quietly, while 18% quit loudly due to stress and poor leader engagement and well-being (Gallup 2023b). Similarly, 51% of employed individuals globally are actively seeking new employment opportunities (Gallup 2023a). Employees undeniably suffer from the detrimental impacts of toxic leadership. Consequently, the outcomes result in reduced employee performance (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020), higher turnover (Watkins and Walker 2021; Williams 2022), and increased hiring and training costs (CIPD 2023; Kılıç and Günşel 2019) due to lost productivity and heightened healthcare expenses (Yavaş 2016). Specifically, Williams (2022) pointed out that employee replacement can cost the workplace up to twice the employee's annual salary/compensation. Indeed, toxic leadership is a global problem across all workplace spheres (Guo et al. 2022).

Moderating the consequences of toxic leadership

Figure 1 illustrates the sparse use of moderating variables in toxic leadership research, highlighting the need for more moderators to be explored. The current study identified four moderating variables (perceived organizational support, perceived insider status, organizational commitment, and intrinsic motivation) that have been studied but are yet to be replicated to determine the

consistent effects in the literature. For example, Khan et al. (2021) found that perceived insider status moderates the negative interaction between toxic leadership and the psychological safety of employees. Conversely, Saleem et al. (2021) pointed out that organizational commitment is a vital stress moderator that dampens the adverse effect of toxic leadership on the safety performance of employees.

Koç et al. (2022) however, argued that intrinsic motivation—a significant predictor of employees' proclivity toward creativity and engagement in challenging work, using their potential to explore and learn—moderates the interaction between toxic leadership and the emotional exhaustion of employees. Distinctly, the utilization of moderators in toxic leadership research is limited. Gaining insights into the variables that can lessen the damaging effects of toxic leadership on employees and organizations is of utmost importance (Wo, Ambrose, and Schminke 2015).

Mediators of toxic leadership

Although leadership is typically conceptualized as a process in which leader behaviors (e.g., toxic leadership) influence distal outcomes (e.g., employee engagement) through mediating variables (e.g., organizational culture, see Paltu and Brouwers 2020), the current study identified a limited number of mediating mechanisms. The examined mediators largely fell into the affective outcomes, with only a few falling into the relational, motivational, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (for review, see Fischer et al. 2021). The mediators are published as tests of relational theories (e.g., LMX), psychological resource theories (e.g., conservation of resources), and work behavior causal theories (like social exchange, social identity, social learning, social information processing, organizational support) (Fischer et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, these studies are limited in their ability to inform theoretical advances. First, most of the articles analyzed did not apply mediating variables, and the handful that did used single mediators, except in three studies; thus, comparing mediators from different theoretical and geographical perspectives was not feasible. Second, as highlighted, there is a dearth of theoretical underpinning in toxic leadership research. Thus, we cannot determine, for instance, whether affective, relational, or motivational mechanisms are more powerful or if their effects are additive. Hence, the utilization of a mediator per article and the use of limited theories make synthesis challenging.

Accordingly, we explored existing studies and theoretical approaches to explain toxic leadership and summarized our findings in the integrative framework. A comprehensive approach to toxic leadership framework is both empirically and theoretically significant, as it provides a systematic way to address existing gaps in literature. Figure 1 shows an integrative framework of toxic leadership based on existing literature.

Proposed theoretical framework

Based on the identified gaps in the literature and leveraging our integrative framework, we propose a toxic leadership model for further empirical and theoretical research, drawing on multiple established theories and employing mediating and moderating variables to investigate toxic leadership effects on employee outcomes and its transmission mechanisms. Given the prevalence and detrimental effect of toxic leadership across all organizational levels, we contend that further research should be conducted at the dyadic, group, and organizational levels, spanning diverse cultural and geographical contexts. For instance, longitudinal studies across all levels would provide valuable insights into how, when, and why toxic leadership influences employees and organizations by collecting multiple observations from leaders and employees over time (Chen et al. 2021; Gandolfi and Stone 2022).

The effects of toxic leadership are classified into three levels in Figure 2: dyadic, group, and organizational, and each level's outcome is illustrated. The proposed theoretical framework categorizes followers of toxic leaders into two types at the dyadic level: altruistic and egocentric. The altruistic followers' actions are not in accordance with the toxic leaders'; as such, they tend to exit the group/organization due to dissatisfaction, which could also result in deviant behaviors like fraud and theft. The latter are followers of toxic leaders. Many egocentric followers often imitate the behaviors of toxic leaders and share their worldviews, thus facilitating toxicity within organizations. Toxic leadership at the group level could manifest in performance decline, distrust in leaders, increased turnover intention, and employee deviant behaviors. The effect of toxic leadership at the organizational level will be evident in performance, sabotaging activities, adaptability to a fast-changing world, and organizational culture.

Specifically, organizational culture explained a 45.8% variance in the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction, 63.5% for the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational commitment, and 71.6% variance in the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention in the study conducted by Paltu and Brouwers (2020) within the South African manufacturing industry. This shows the importance of organizational culture and its susceptibility to toxic leadership. Culture is a crucial strategic element in forecasting behaviors and outcomes; organizational culture can influence employee behaviors and may ultimately promote toxic behaviors (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020).

Leaders shape organizational culture, and as such, organizations reflect their leaders' characteristics in establishing an ethical culture, which includes behaviors, attitudes, and the "tone at the top" (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). However, an unethical climate permeated by a culture of fear created by toxic leaders sets the norms consistent with toxic leadership behaviors. Fear can induce cognitive paralysis in employees, adversely impacting their emotional and intellectual reactions in the workplace (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). This culture of fear enables toxic leaders to maintain their positions of power.

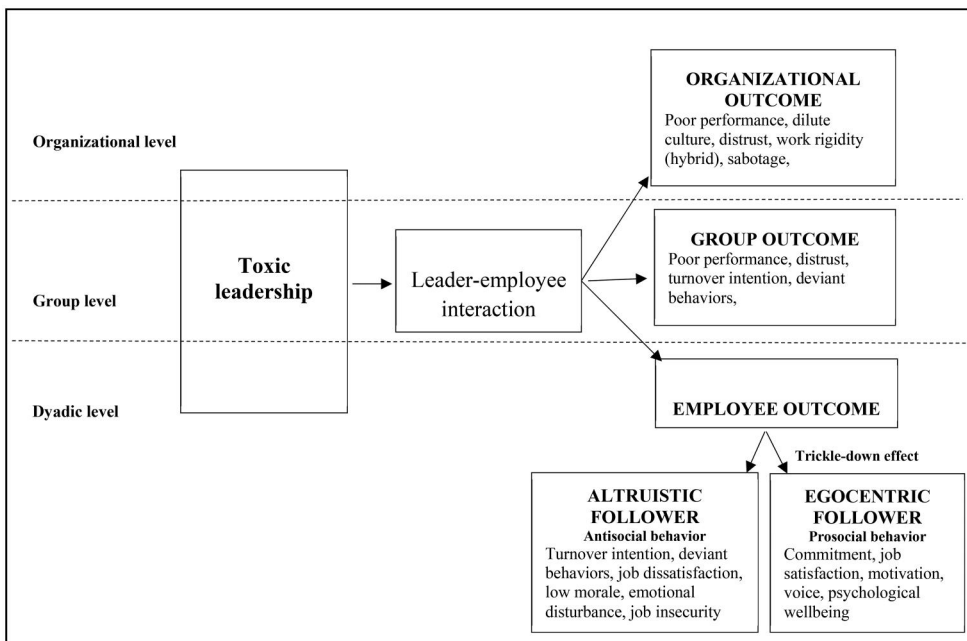


Figure 2. Proposed theoretical model. Note: Figure 2 shows the connection between toxic leaders and employees.

Why endure the rot of toxic leaders?

Prior research has shown that employees of toxic leaders remain in the workplace for an average of seven years than those of nontoxic leaders (five years), owing to a lack of motivation to seek other employment opportunities, unwillingness to accept a pay cut, or inadequate skills to pursue a different career (15Be 2023). These explanations are based on fundamental human psychological principles since the decision to relinquish a current position without having an alternative plan presents a difficult challenge. Additionally, employees subjected to significant stress levels caused by toxic leaders often experience emotional exhaustion, which impairs their ability to pursue better opportunities (15Be 2023; Rasool et al. 2021).

However, Mergen and Ozbilgin (2021) stated that the co-creators of toxic leadership are the employees: there is no leadership, toxic or not, without employees. By applying Bourdieu's concepts of *illusion*, Mergen and Ozbilgin (2021) found that employees endure toxic leadership rot due to self-interest, with a crucial incentive being the ability to lessen the personal uncertainty experienced within the workplace. The fear of uncertainty makes employees bear the rot and, perhaps, inspires them to become agents of toxicity (Green 2014; Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021), cascading the effect to susceptible followers (Rice et al. 2021; Wo, Ambrose, and Schminke 2015). Lipman-Blumen (2005) and Webster, Brough, and Daly (2016) noted that toxic leaders exploit employees' fear of change, psychological demands, and anxiety to attain a desired outcome.

Discussion and recommendations for rethinking toxic leadership research

We analyzed 44 articles on toxic leadership, including four measurement constructs, and found that the constructs were developed based on distinct toxic leadership dimensions (behaviors). Our analysis revealed crucial challenges in the conceptualization, measurement, and empirical/theoretical research of toxic leadership. In our review, we provided recommendations for effectively addressing the challenges. Lastly, we summarized the proposed suggestions to ensure future research is robust enough to produce significant theoretical advancements and practical policy implications.

Toxic leadership conceptualization and measurement rethink

A detailed examination of previous literature revealed that toxic leadership needs to be explicitly defined. Although a few scholars (Gandolfi and Stone 2022; Green 2014; Labrague et al. 2020; Lipman-Blumen 2005; Reed 2004; Schmidt 2008; Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020) have defined toxic leadership using distinct dimensions, evidence suggests that a broader perspective of the toxic leadership behavioral pattern should be considered. The lack of a unified definition has led to subjective interpretations based on the opinions of others and influenced by sociocultural factors. For example, Stringer et al. (2023) found that the lack of a clear definition that incorporates the fundamental behaviors of toxic leadership may hinder efforts to build a cohesive organizational strategy to tackle toxic leadership. Furthermore, the existing definitions are based on distinct behaviors that have originated in Western countries and limited geographical sectors. Thus, existing definitions could confuse conceptualization and lead to erroneous measurement constructs (Fischer et al. 2021).

Furthermore, prior to early 2020, only three scholars (Çelebi, Güner, and Yildiz 2015; Green 2014; Schmidt 2008) had empirically investigated specific toxic leadership behavioral patterns and transformed these behaviors into measurement constructs. The paucity of empirical research on toxic leadership, particularly in the health sector, prompted Labrague et al. (2020) to develop the fourth toxic leadership scale, specifically for nursing managers. Despite existing measurements being developed based on different dimensional constructs, there are contradictions in findings,

and certain critical behaviors, such as power quest, psychopathy, and corruption were not considered on any of the scales. Using Schmidt's (2008) measurement, for example, toxic leadership negatively predicted job satisfaction within the Chilean tertiary sector (Acuña and Male 2024) but positively predicted job satisfaction in the South African manufacturing sector (Paltu and Brouwers 2020). However, toxic leadership negatively predicted organizational commitment for both studies.

Although Green's (2014) measurement construct linked power to "ethical failure" dimension, we contend that "power" should be considered a core behavior of the toxic leadership scale. Importantly, toxic leaders perceive leadership fundamentally as exerting power over employees or the organization (Stringer et al. 2023), and this can lead to several toxic behaviors such as coercion, corruption, and narcissism (Gandolfi and Stone 2022). In addition, research indicates that early signs of toxic leadership manifest when ambitious leaders violate ethical standards, exploit employees, and implement coercive policies by virtue of the power bestowed upon them (Walton 2021b). Power also corrupts leaders and results in corrupt practices within the organization (Sippio 2023; Walton 2021b). Additionally, certain scholars argued that the most harmful toxic leadership behavior is psychopathy, emphasizing the importance of further studies in this area (Boddy 2023; Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021).

We propose the development of a comprehensive and standardized toxic leadership measurement construct that considers a holistic inclusion of the fundamental behaviors of toxic leadership, as highlighted in Table 1, in addition to power, corruption, and psychopathy, to advance empirical studies in toxic leadership literature accurately. Importantly, existing measurement constructs may not accurately evaluate the fundamental toxic leadership behaviors, including power, psychopathy, and corruption, as the heterogeneous nature of the dimensions makes comparative analysis particularly challenging.

Empirical and theoretical understanding of toxic leadership rethink

Our review of existing toxic leadership literature revealed a significant paucity of both empirical and theoretical research. Specifically, most toxic leadership research is qualitative, based on a myriad of toxic leadership behaviors and lacking theoretical underpinnings (see Table 3). For example, Walker and Watkins (2020) thematic study classified toxic leadership into six behaviors: aberrant behavior, ineffective leadership, egocentrism, emotional dysregulation, moral corruption, and power abuse. A follow-up study by Sippio (2023) linked derailment, destructive, tyrannical, supportive-disloyal, and laissez-faire to toxic leadership based on personal experience. These studies had no theoretical underpinnings, and all the behaviors outlined above, except for egocentrism, are absent from existing measurement constructs.

Furthermore, empirical studies with theoretical underpinnings are few and mostly based on Schmidt's (2008) measurement construct, which was developed within Western culture, education, and few multisector contexts. As noted by Labrague et al. (2020), the basis of Schmidt's measurement (limited to five behaviors) may differ from toxic behaviors in other geographical and cultural contexts. Moreover, there is a dearth of theoretical underpinning, mediators, and moderators. Unfortunately, we only found one time-lagged study among the papers reviewed (see Table 3). To address this concern, scholars should seek exogenous sources of variation in their research. Qualitative studies are obvious but not the only way to enhance toxic leadership literature. More empirical research and theoretical frameworks (and longitudinal studies) with mediating and moderating mechanisms are required to identify mechanisms that will prevent the growth of toxic leadership in organizations.

Our review also showed that most toxic leadership studies were cross-sectional and conducted at the individual level (see Table 3), with only one dyadic study undertaken in China (see Khan et al. 2021). Unfortunately, we found just one quantitative toxic leadership study at the group

level and none at the organizational level. Conducting extensive research on toxic leadership at the organizational level is crucial to identifying the factors that reinforce or curtail toxic leadership within the organization. Furthermore, it is necessary to determine the techniques that can be used to address psychological, cultural, and social complexities within the frameworks and dynamics of this detrimental phenomenon. Research suggests that toxic behaviors are institutionalized within organizations and may be taught to new employees as the normative operating procedure (Mergen and Ozbilgin 2021). Given that an organization's culture pertains to decision-making processes, actions, and effective communication, the normalization of toxic leadership behaviors might further diminish the possibility of toxic leaders and their egocentric followers from recognizing the moral dimensions of cultural norms and the decision-making processes, as such, prolonging the life of the toxic illusion and facilitating its proliferation in organizations.

Furthermore, theories were scarcely employed in the studies analyzed, as previously noted by Labrague (2023). Importantly, theories provide numerous lenses to examine complex and societal issues, focusing on different facets of data and offering theoretical frameworks for analysis (Labrague 2023). Given the role that power and psychopathic traits play in the emergence of toxic leadership, alongside the leaders' deceit, manipulation, and intimidation to achieve personal goals and conceal emotional deficiencies with their charismatic personalities (Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders 2019), we recommend the use of power-related, emotion-related, and/or stress-related theories in conjunction with our proposed theoretical framework (see Figure 2) to empirically and theoretically investigate the effects of toxic leadership on employee outcomes at different organizational levels using different mediators and moderators.

Practical implications

This review provides human resource professionals with a thorough understanding of toxic leadership, serving as an initial reference to ensure employees are equipped with a comprehensive knowledge of toxic leadership. The absence of a unified definition and understanding of toxic leadership allows toxic leaders to evade accountability for harming employees and the organization (Stringer et al. 2023). Hence, leaders must be accountable for preventing and addressing toxic leadership, communicate that such behaviors are unacceptable, and hold others responsible for the organization's culture. Implementing an ethics ombudsperson to investigate toxic leadership allegations, supported by human resources mechanisms for dismissing culpable leaders or leaders who refuse to change, would effectively curtail workplace toxic leadership and its long-term outcomes like cardiovascular diseases (Ervasti and Kivimaki 2023). Furthermore, developing and promoting open-door policies and leadership skills that emphasize ethical behavior, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and empathy are crucial in organizations.

Leaders influence organizational culture, and as a result, when it comes to establishing an ethical culture, organizations reflect the behaviors of their leaders. Toxic leadership undermines organizational culture by violating the workplace's legitimate interests and adversely impacting employee well-being, including mental health and career progression (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020). Therefore, human resources must establish a comprehensive recruitment process to select and develop organizational leaders, as toxic leadership behaviors can have a multiplier effect that negatively affects organizational culture, productivity, and overall employee well-being (Boddy, Boulter, and Fishwick 2021). The workplace can use validated clinical assessment tools during the recruitment process to identify toxic behaviors, particularly those exhibited by psychopaths, who are often charismatic (Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders 2019). Likewise, implementing strategies with well-established mechanisms that prevent toxic behaviors (as illustrated in Table 1), including psychopathy and corruption, while regulating power and control would create unfavorable conditions for toxic leadership (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2020).

It is important to develop interventions and policies centered on employees' needs, mitigating uncertainties in organizations that may arise from manipulation and intimidation and reducing their susceptibility to toxic leadership's allure. This will prevent employees from becoming entangled in the toxic illusion. This can be further strengthened by promoting whistle-blowing policies (Omar and Ahmad 2020), which creates an open culture (Roza 2024), thereby improving employee trust, job satisfaction, and well-being. Finally, implementing a framework to assess organizational culture can facilitate effective communication and engage employees in decision-making, thus, improving performance and overall organizational health.

Limitations

Prior to conclusion, we acknowledge that, like any research, our review also has limitations. We focused on published papers to highlight the literature on toxic leadership and avert duplication from unpublished theses later published (Fischer et al. 2021). We focused primarily on published papers and a few online articles. However, this approach might have overlooked significant research and emerging trends due to inherent bias (Turnbull, Chugh, and Luck 2023). Furthermore, the involvement of a researcher in literature search introduces the possibility of overlooking relevant studies. Given that research on the cross-cultural influences of toxic leadership is limited (Mitchell, Rivera, and Treviño 2023), additional investigations could ascertain if toxic leadership behaviors and employee outcomes are culture-specific, geographical-specific, or more prominently based on gender. The expansion of the topic would further broaden the understanding of cultural variations and toxic leadership causes. Furthermore, future studies can also adopt a psychodynamic approach, drawing on the extensive work of de Vries (2012), to deeply understand the hidden psychological dynamics and complexities of toxic leadership behaviors that hinder team, group, and organizational efficiency, uncovering the extensive array of the probable causes and consequences of toxic leadership.

Conclusion

Understanding toxic leadership behaviors is crucial in the pursuit of cultivating a healthier and more sustainable workplace. Like a virus, toxic leaders embolden incompetent employees and deter competent ones while sapping the life out of organizations. Creating a frightful, demoralizing, and dehumanizing work climate, toxic leadership ultimately taints the organization. Effective, ethical, and safe leadership is essential in organizations, and open-door policies are crucial to facilitate affected employees to express their grievances. The current study provides a comprehensive understanding of toxic leadership, which holds considerable significance for both theory and practice.

It is crucial for organizations to thoroughly examine the leadership styles demonstrated by leaders, clearly define leader toxicity, understand how it manifests, assess its internal impact, and guide potential leaders on the importance of cultivating positive leadership. By embodying principles, communicating vision, encouraging teamwork and empowerment, and actively supporting inclusivity, organizations can foster a healthy workplace culture, where employees thrive. Organizations must, therefore, invest in leadership development to improve organizational culture and mitigate the negative consequences of toxic leadership.

Ethical approval

The authors affirm that the paper review complies with both the APA Code of Conduct and the authors' national ethics guidelines. This includes requirements that the research be carried out

ethically, that results be reported truthfully, that the work submitted be original and not plagiarized, and that authorship reflects the contributions of individuals.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not employed in this article being a narrative review of past literature.

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Data availability statement

The authors did not analyze or generate any datasets in this article; being a narrative article.

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Appendix

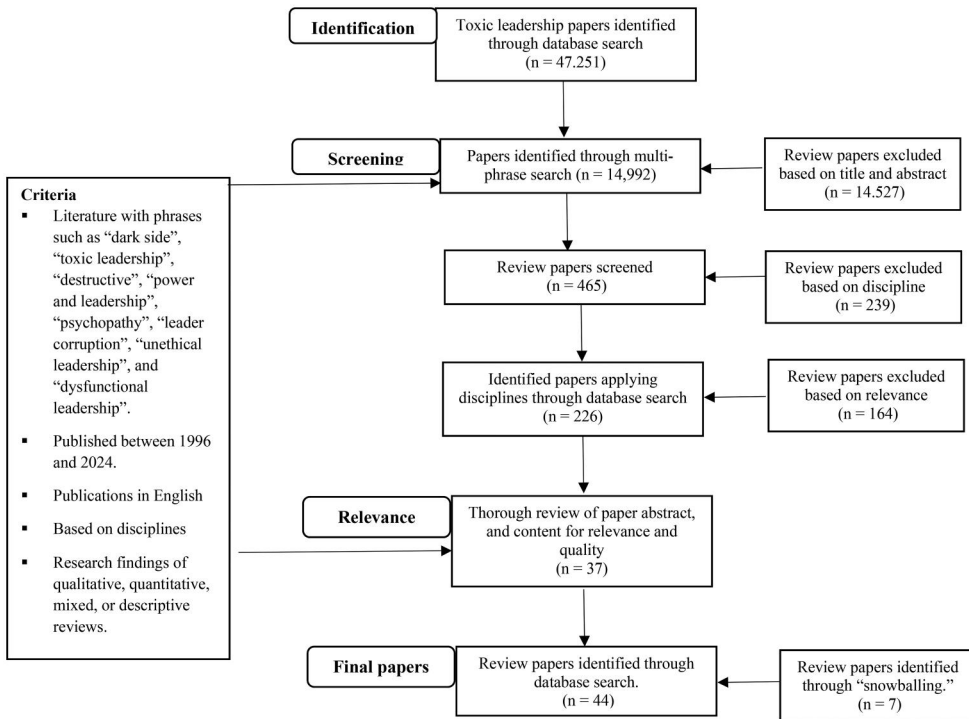


Figure A1. Methodology flow chart.