

5-25-2024

Impact of Toxic Leadership on the Mental Health of Employees in Texas State Agencies

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Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Monika Diaz

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Impact of Toxic Leadership on the Mental Health of Employees in Texas State Agencies

by

Monika Diaz

MS, Walden University, 2019

BS, University of Phoenix, 2018

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of toxic leadership on the mental health of employees within Texas state agencies, utilizing betrayal trauma theory (BTT) as the theoretical framework. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically through semi-structured interviews with eight employees who have experienced toxic leadership firsthand. These interviews aimed to uncover the psychological effects of such leadership on employees, with particular attention to symptoms of stress, anxiety, and job satisfaction. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that toxic leadership was significantly associated with increased psychological distress among employees. This distress manifested as heightened anxiety, depression, and general decrease in job satisfaction, corroborating the theoretical predictions of BTT that betrayal in significant relationships can lead to severe psychological impacts. Moreover, the data indicated that toxic leadership undermined trust and safety in professional settings, contributing negatively to the overall workplace atmosphere. Based on these findings, it is recommended to implement targeted leadership training programs that emphasize ethical conduct and the promotion of mental health awareness. It is also important to establish a support system for employees affected by toxic leadership, which could include counseling and resources to help mitigate the identified psychological impacts. These recommendations are designed to improve positive social change in organizational health and workplace environments, ultimately enhancing employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.

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Dedication

In loving memory of my father, Daray—a man who quietly battled many unseen challenges. I am proud to be the first Doctor in the Perkins family, a milestone I hope brings him joy in the spirit realm. May he look upon this legacy with pride.

In loving memory of my grandparents (Lloyd, Monika, Donna, Willard, Hildagard, and Eddie), the steadfast guardians who shaped me from scattered pieces into who I am today.

To my mother, Heather, who faced life's toughest challenges with immense strength and grace. She never dreamed that the name she once lovingly circled with hearts in her high school notebooks, waiting for me to be born, would become the first doctor in our family—may this achievement be a testament to your courage.

To Kathy, a stepmother who embodied the essence of dedication and strength. Even in our worst moments, your resilience shone brightly, teaching us that women possess an extraordinary power to overcome even their greatest challenges.

To my children (Liana, Elijah, Anabia), who have brought unmeasurable joy and purpose into my life, this was for you as well. You inspire me to be better every day and to strive for achievements that once seemed beyond reach. May you see in this accomplished the power of hope and the reward of determination.

And to anyone who finds themselves mirrored in my past—a youth teetering on the brink of uncertainty, seated beside peers whose paths seem effortlessly laid out before them—let this be a beacon of hope. Thank you to the teachers that saw me through (Linda Danehower and Richard Bolckom).

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful for the guidance and support I have received through this academic journey, which has been both challenging and immensely rewarding. Foremost, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my chair, Dr. Michael Johnson. His kindness and patience have been the guiding lights through the peaks and valleys of this process.

I am equally thankful for my second chair, Dr. David Mohr, who has generously contributed his time and expertise. His perspective has enriched this research, and his commitment to academic excellence was inspiring.

To my husband, Anthony Diaz, whose support has been my stronghold, I owe a debt of gratitude. His belief in my capabilities and his unflagging encouragement have made this arduous journey smoother and more joyful. His sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, and his love has been a constant reminder of what truly matters.

Lastly, thank you Dr. Tara Ross for your guidance, which served as the impetus for this dissertation.

To each of you, I offer my sincerest thanks. This achievement was not solely mine; it reflects the collective support, guidance, and encouragement that you all so graciously provided.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the workplace, toxic leadership remains a significant concern with psychological, socioeconomic, and organizational repercussions. In this dissertation, grounded in betrayal trauma theory (BTT), I sought to enhance understanding by focusing on the direct experiences of employees in Texas state organizations affected by toxic leadership. Through qualitative analysis, I aimed to shed light on the reported psychological effects on these individuals, adding to existing research. Considering these firsthand accounts, the study could inform targeted intervention strategies and policies.

Background

The literature has offered valuable contributions on how toxic leadership affects employee well-being, but these studies are often confined to the perspectives of organizational psychology (Chana et al., 2021; Dattner & Van Oosten, 2017; Erickson et al., 2017; Semedo et al., 2022). This limits the understanding of how toxic leadership affects employees' mental well-being. There needs to be a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that integrates organizational psychology and clinical psychology. I offered a thorough and interconnected analysis of how toxic leadership impacts employee mental health through synthesized insights from organizational psychology and integrated clinical psychology to explore psychological and emotional effects on individuals.

Another significant gap in research was the need for more focus on state employees who face toxic leadership issues. While there is research on toxic leadership in sectors such as the military, healthcare, and education (Aubrey, 2012; Branam et al.,

2014; Indradevi, 2016; Jackson et al., 2013), there was a lack of exploration into its occurrence in state employment settings. But it is important to consider public sector employment's distinct organizational frameworks and stressors characteristics, such as hierarchical structures, policy-driven environments, and public accountability. These unique aspects of state agency positions significantly shape employees' experiences of toxic leadership, presenting a crucial area for specialized investigations. Addressing this gap provided a comprehensive understanding of toxic leadership's impact across various professional landscapes.

Given these identified gaps, this study needed to close the identified gaps and provide support for future research. I aimed to combine organizational and clinical psychology insights to explore toxic leadership's impact on state employees. Focusing on the firsthand experiences of this employee group yielded a more nuanced understanding. Results from this study can inform targeted interventions, which may enhance organizational efficiency and the mental well-being of employees in state employment settings.

Problem Statement

The research problem targeted in this study was to improve understanding of toxic leadership's impact on the mental well-being of state employees in Texas. While research has explored toxic leadership in a variety of sectors and its negative implications on employees' mental health (Asha & Snigdha; Aryee et al., 2008; Aubrey, 2012; Branam et al., 2014; Galupo & Resnick, 2016; Jackson et al., 2013), the literature has not focused on state employment settings in Texas. The literature on public sector employees in other

states must be more present to draw more detailed comparisons and contrasts, thereby offering a richer, more diverse perspective currently underrepresented. Texas state agencies present a distinctive case for studying toxic leadership due to their specific organizational structures, cultural dynamics, and the state's considerable public sector size. Texas's diverse workforce, unique economic sectors, and singular legal-political environment provided a rich backdrop for examining the nuances of toxic leadership in ways that may differ from other regions. This setting allowed for an investigation into how regional characteristics influence leadership and employee interactions, providing nuanced insights crucial for understanding and addressing toxic leadership in the public sector. This focused approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the state's specific influences on public sector dynamics, offering insights that a broader study might need to include.

Texas has two hundred state agencies, and many employees may have been subjected to toxic leadership. This underscores the importance of this study in exploring toxic leadership in Texas state agency settings, contributing to an understanding of toxic leadership within organizational behavior and clinical psychology. This study extends research on toxic leadership, characterized by abusive supervision, self-serving behaviors, and neglect of employee well-being (Dobbs, 2014; Hitchcock, 2015; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Schmidt, 2008). It deepens the understanding of this phenomenon within the state agency context, focusing on the lived experiences of Texas state employees. By exploring this under-investigated area, the research contributed to the broader field of leadership dynamics and their organizational and psychological impacts.

Purpose

This study aimed to explore employees' lived experiences within Texas state agencies, focusing on their encounters with toxic leadership. I sought to understand how these employees perceive and internalize toxic leadership behaviors and how such behaviors affect their mental well-being. I employed an interpretive research paradigm to explore the lived experiences of employees in designated Texas state agencies subjected to toxic leadership. Using the interpretive framework allowed me to explore leadership styles' complex psychological impacts. The approach facilitated capturing the participants' subjective experiences and perspectives, eventually leading to valuable preventative and intervention strategies. This in-depth exploration was motivated by developing more valid and effective preventative measures and interventions grounded in employees' firsthand experiences and perspectives. This study uncovers insights that can guide the creation of targeted organizational strategies and interventions designed to address and mitigate the adverse effects of these leadership behaviors.

Research Question

The study's central research question was "How do Texas state employees describe their experiences of encountering toxic leadership within their agencies?"

Theoretical Framework

BTT, introduced by Freyd (1991), was the framework for this qualitative study. BTT provided an intricate understanding of relationships characterized by power imbalances, often symbolic of the dynamics between leaders and their subordinates. This theory was pertinent in studying the psychological impact of toxic leadership, as it helped

to explore the complexities of power management and its potentially abusive applications. For example, in this theoretical context, Ford, and Richardson (2014) further underscored the importance of trust in authoritarian relationships and the detrimental psychological outcomes when such trust is compromised. The framework shaped the study's approach, guiding the research question formation and assisting in data analysis. It offered a lens through which to examine the ripple effects of betrayal within organizational structures, particularly in settings with toxic leadership. Grounding the questions in this theoretical framework ensured that they were structured to elicit unbiased, authentic responses, thereby maintaining the integrity and objectivity of the interview process. Furthermore, BTT emphasizes not just immediate impacts but also exacerbating external factors, such as diminished organizational justice, eroded faith in institutional integrity, and lack of social support—all pivotal in the experience of trauma within toxic leadership settings. I provide a more thorough explanation and analysis of the BTT framework and its application in Chapter 2.

Nature of Study

I employed a qualitative research design to explore toxic leadership's mental and physical impacts on Texas state employees. This methodology was particularly effective for understanding employees' firsthand experiences, including psychological and physical repercussions (see Teherani et al., 2015). I intended to delve deeper into how toxic leadership can manifest in various forms of distress for employees. The research focus of this study was toxic leadership and its consequences on the well-being of state employees in Texas from the employee perspective. This focus was essential for

unearthing the lived experiences of this group, filling a gap in current research. I aimed to provide authentic, in-depth insights into how employees perceive toxic leadership affects their mental well-being, including physical symptoms like ulcers or headaches. In line with the study's objectives, I collected data through semistructured interviews with Texas state employees subjected to toxic leadership. In the analysis, I employed thematic methods to extract patterns and insights, thus offering a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Definitions

To ensure a thorough understanding of this was study's focus, the following were the definitions of key terms and concepts.

Betrayal: Foundational to BTT, betrayal refers to the breach of implicit or explicit trust by someone in a position of authority (Ford & Richardson, 2014). In the context of toxic leadership, betrayal alludes to actions by leaders that undermine the trust and well-being of their team members, often manifesting in behaviors such as deceit or manipulation.

Employee mental well-being: Encapsulating the psychological health and functionality of individuals in a workplace (WHO, 2020); this concept goes beyond diagnosing mental disorders and includes factors such as cognitive abilities and resilience to stressful conditions. When employees encounter toxic leadership, their well-being can be significantly compromised, leading to stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Tepper, 2007).

Stress: As a result of experiences of betrayal and toxic leadership, stress not only

impacts mental well-being but can also manifest in physical symptoms. It serves as an intermediary factor that can exacerbate other mental health issues like anxiety and depression; subsequently, stress and its manifestations are essential for examining the full scope of toxic leadership's impact.

Toxic leadership: Individuals' harmful behaviors in leadership roles that create a hostile and damaging work environment (Den et al., 2010). Toxic leadership may include but is not limited to bullying, verbal abuse, and subtle forms of manipulation. Toxic leaders typically prioritize their objectives over the welfare of their subordinates and often display a lack of empathy and concern (Leiter & Maslach, 2009).

Assumptions

To enhance the validity of qualitative research, it is essential to understand the potential pitfalls and assumptions the researcher makes (Noble, H., & Smith, J. 2015). Such awareness can lead to mitigation strategies. It was assumed that participants provided honest and forthright accounts of their experiences for the current study. This was critical for the study's validity, mainly when dealing with subjective qualitative data. To encourage honesty, I informed participants about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. To ensure trustworthiness in participant responses, especially considering the influence of toxic work environments, I established a safe space by implementing confidentiality measures, providing anonymity, and ensuring a non-judgmental, empathetic listening environment during interviews. This approach aligned with strategies highlighted in research for mitigating the impact of workplace toxicity on research participation (Teherani et al., 2015). Another assumption was that state

organizations were amenable to data collection efforts. Access to authentic data was crucial for an in-depth study of the subject matter—the research aimed to contribute positively to employee well-being and retention so that organizations may view participation favorably.

As for researcher bias, my background as a state employee and my personal experiences with toxic leadership could shape my interpretation of the data; however, to mitigate this, I implemented stringent research protocols, including a structured interview script that avoided leading questions. Per the review form, I incorporated subject matter experiences, including those of a clinical psychologist and an organizational psychologist, to scrutinize the interview questions and optimize the chance for objectivity. To strengthen the study's validity further, I implemented triangulation by cross-verifying data through various sources and perspectives. This approach helped address assumptions by providing a comprehensive view, reducing the risk of bias inherent in single-source data. Additionally, member-checking was employed, where participants reviewed and provided feedback on the findings. This process ensured that the interpretations aligned with participants' experiences, mitigating misrepresentation and strengthening the credibility of the study's conclusions.

By examining and addressing the assumptions inherent in the study, I strengthened its scholarly foundation and enhanced its validity. This process was essential to ensure the findings were robust and dependable and contributed meaningfully to academic discourse. This systematic approach bolstered the research findings and comprehensively contributed to the literature on toxic leadership and employee well-

being. In doing so, I aimed to fill existing gaps in knowledge while adhering to high standards of qualitative research, thereby serving as a reliable resource for future research and practical applications.

Scope and Delimitations

While I aspired to comprehensively explore employees' firsthand experiences with toxic leadership in Texas state organizations, some limitations were inherent in this design. One significant delimitation was the study's geographical constraint; it focuses solely on Texas state organizations and may not be generalizable to other regions of the United States, parts of the world, or other employment sectors. Additionally, while the research aims to offer insights into broader economic and organizational consequences, it was exclusively from employees who have experienced toxic leadership, which may not encompass the perspectives of leadership or other organizational stakeholders. Although I aimed to contribute to organizational practices and clinical fields, I did not include clinical trials; therefore, the findings will be limited in directly informing clinical applications.

Regarding participant selection, I employed purposive sampling by identifying and selecting individuals who have directly experienced toxic leadership in their current or previous roles based on specific criteria related to their exposure to such environments (Tepper, 2007). Additionally, snowball sampling was utilized, where initial participants will recommend other potential participants with relevant experiences. This approach is elaborated in Chapter 3, detailing the criteria for selection and the methods for reaching out to and confirming the suitability of participants for the study. This approach ensured

that the research focused on employee narratives rather than leaders' perspectives. I aimed to gather and analyze the perceptions of employees who have experienced toxic leadership, providing insights into how these behaviors are perceived and their impact on the workforce. This approach narrowed the focus to employees' lived experiences rather than undertaking a broader analysis of toxic leadership behaviors or comparing them with other leadership styles like transformational leadership (Den et al., 2010).

The study's findings have limited transferability due to the non-random selection of participants. While the insights gained could be informative for different organizational contexts, they were not intended for broad generalization across varied industries, cultures, or nations (Che et al., 2020). Therefore, I recommend caution when applying these findings to different settings. Future research should consider a more diverse participant pool to explore the impact of toxic leadership across a broad range of professional environments.

Limitations

The study's limitations, which are essential for maintaining transparency and academic integrity, include a small sample size of 10. Qualitative studies commonly have fewer participants; however, this means that findings might reflect specific characteristics of the sample rather than general trends across Texas state organizations. To address this, the study aligned with Saunders et al. (2018), who suggest that data saturation in qualitative research is often reached with a sample size of around nine. My initial goal was interviewing at least 10 participants, but I included fewer as they fit the study's criteria. This was an adaptable strategy aimed to ensure thorough analysis, with data

saturation indicated by the recurrence of similar themes in interviews, thus confirming the sufficiency of the sample size for comprehensive evaluation.

Acknowledging a potential challenge, organizations may decline to provide approval for recruitment, especially considering the study's focus, which may not positively affect their leadership practices. The study employed a multifaceted approach to address the potential challenge of participant recruitment. In addition to this, the recruitment strategy was augmented by leveraging social media channels and distributing referral flyers within professional networks. This was a broad-based approach designed to attract a diverse pool of participants, fitting into the overall methodology to ensure a robust and comprehensive analysis.

Another limitation was the potential for unconscious bias, particularly given the researcher's experience as a state employee. I established several measures to mitigate this. First, I strictly adhered to data collection and analysis protocols to ensure objectivity. Second, a debriefing phase post-data collection allowed participants to review and validate the study's findings, offering additional scrutiny. Further, I recorded interviews with participants' consent to provide transparency and data integrity.

Significance

I aimed to explore the individual narratives of employees affected by toxic leadership within Texas state organizations. The study was grounded in BTT and offered a close examination of the emotional and psychological distress experienced by employees. The findings aligned with the foundational literature and contributed to a further understanding of toxic leadership in vocational psychology, thereby assisting

clinicians in crafting more targeted interventions. Expanding on existing studies of toxic leadership's effects, this research delved into its intricate psychological impacts on employees. The detailed personal accounts gathered are invaluable for clinical and industrial-organizational psychologists. For clinicians, these narratives can aid in devising more nuanced prevention and treatment approaches grounded in the real-life experiences of employees. Meanwhile, I-O psychologists can harness this new data to reinforce and refine their advocacy for empathetic and effective organizational leadership styles. The objective was to foster a synergetic interplay between clinical interventions and organizational leadership approaches specifically tailored to enhance the psychological well-being of employees.

Regarding the implications for Texas state organizations, I provided theoretical insights and a lens through which to view their leadership structures. I emphasized the need for immediate leadership training and policy changes by offering data-backed findings that include direct employee accounts. Incorporating mental health considerations into leadership models can address issues highlighted by Schmidt's (2008) definition of toxic leadership, such as harassment, which are factors in the rising Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints (EEOC, 2024); therefore, these insights can help organizations reduce costs associated with behaviors attributing to their high turnover, increased complaints, and increased absences.

Lastly, the societal implications of this study are significant. The findings suggested effective strategies for countering toxic leadership, which may lead to a working environment prioritizing mental well-being and productivity. This aligns with

research arguing the importance of healthy working conditions for a thriving economy.

The long-term vision, drawing on collaborative efforts from clinicians, I-O psychologists, and state agencies, was to mitigate the negative impacts of toxic leadership, promoting an integrated approach to employee well-being and organizational success.

Summary

Studying toxic leadership in Texas state agencies was essential for several reasons. As a significant economic powerhouse in the United States, Texas contributes significantly to the national economy. The state's vast population and diverse industries mean that its public sector policies and leadership styles have far-reaching impacts, both within the state and nationally. The health and efficiency of these agencies directly affect community well-being and economic stability. Drawing on insights from studies like Belwas and Koustelios (2014), research in this area was crucial for understanding and improving the interplay between leadership, employee mental health, and broader socioeconomic outcomes. This focus on Texas provided a unique opportunity to study the implications of toxic leadership in a locally significant and nationally influential context. Employees who encountered toxic leadership provided information about the psychological repercussions of such leadership styles. Understanding these dynamics can help design more effective interventions (Sun et al., 2016), which this study contributes to. I aimed to offer a better understanding of the effects of toxic leadership. The findings inform strategies that foster healthier workplace dynamics, benefiting employee well-being and overall organizational effectiveness. By addressing this gap in research, I aimed to bolster the social agent mission, underscoring the importance of mental well-

being in the workplace and the pivotal role leadership plays in shaping it.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was the multifaceted impact of toxic leadership on employee mental well-being, which extended to broader societal issues such as economic performance and social cohesion (Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al., 2022). This literature review explored the dynamics, consequences, and potential interventions related to toxic leadership, specifically focusing on its effect on employee mental well-being and socioeconomic implications for organizations and society. By examining the employees' voices in this review, I aimed to understand comprehensively how toxic leadership shapes their experiences. This review provides a concise synopsis of the current literature, establishing the problem's relevance and previewing significant chapter sections.

The Strategy of Literature Search

The strategy I used to gather relevant literature for this study included using the following databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, and Walden University's Library. I used the following keywords and themes, as they are directly related to the topic: *employee mental health, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, workplace toxicity, coping strategies and behaviors of employees, mental health and economic hardships, employee mental health, psychological contract breach, betrayal trauma, toxic leadership, and socioeconomic impacts, effective leadership development, and mitigating employee harm*. I attempted to ensure all literature was conducted within the last 5 to 10 years; however, some literature was over 10 years old, yet it was relevant to the current study.

Theoretical Framework

BTT, developed by Jennifer J. Freyd in 1991, offered a distinct perspective on trauma, differing from traditional trauma theories that often focus on external events like natural disasters. BTT centers on the psychological impact of betrayal, mainly when the source of trauma is a trusted figure, such as a family member or authority figure. This theory posits that betrayal from someone within a close relationship can lead to significant psychological distress. Unlike traditional models, BTT emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships and trust in the experience and processing of trauma, making it an appropriate framework for understanding traumas that occur within personal and professional relationships.

Major BTT Propositions

Based on BTT, toxic environments are anticipated to induce elevated levels of psychological distress in employees, manifesting as emotional and cognitive dysregulation (Freyd & Birrell, 2014). This exposure to betrayal trauma affects the employees' baseline assumptions about trust, safety, and relationships, hindering their ability to form meaningful interpersonal bonds (Freyd, 1996). The heightened stress and relational disconnection put employees at greater risk for developing mental health disorders like posttraumatic stress disorder or complex posttraumatic stress disorder, particularly when betrayal trauma persists over a prolonged period (Freyd & DePrince, 2013). These propositions underpinned the study's exploration of the unique challenges state employees face when subjected to toxic leadership. Building on the BTT framework, I argued that toxic leadership within state organizations is a form of

interpersonal betrayal and severely affects employees' psychological well-being (Freyd, 1994; Freyd & Birrell, 2013).

Previous Applications and Rationale for Choice

Previous studies utilizing BTT have investigated toxic leadership in sectors such as education and healthcare. These studies laid a foundational understanding of how BTT applies to different organizational settings and the impact of toxic leadership on mental health. For instance, Malahngu (2021) used BTT as a theoretical lens to explore how toxic leadership behaviors can adversely affect the trust and well-being of employees in academic settings. Similarly, Black and Mancini (2022) used BTT to offer a fresh perspective on trauma in the workplace. Brewer (2021) applied BTT in the workplace, focusing on betrayal by institutions and its impacts on employee health and organizational commitment. This body of research highlighted the importance of BTT as a framework for examining the psychological consequences of toxic leadership, providing a crucial context for further exploration in various professional environments.

The selection of BTT as the guiding framework for this study was rooted in its unique focus on the psychological and emotional consequences of betrayal by trusted authority figures (Freyd, 1994). The research established the relevance of BTT in exploring the impact of toxic leadership in various settings, including higher education and healthcare (Brewer, 2021; Malahngu, 2021). Such studies substantiated BTT's applicability in elucidating the intricate psychological ramifications of toxic leadership, making it an apt theoretical lens for this research. The current study explored the effects of toxic leadership within state organizations, a context where authority dynamics are

prominent. BTT's emphasis on betraying trust and safety in interpersonal relationships and aligned with state entities' organizational environments. Therefore, BTT offered a theoretical perspective and relevance for understanding the unique challenges state employees face when subjected toxic leadership. The theory's rich conceptual underpinnings and empirical support in similar contexts made it an excellent choice for examining the research questions posed in this study.

Literature Review

The literature on toxic leadership and its effects on employee mental health was not as diverse or extensive as it should be. Studies were often limited to quantitative methods to explore the intricacies of toxic leadership behaviors. Researchers have approached the problem from different angles, with some focusing on emotional effects and physical effects, while others have found a link to socioeconomic implications and impacts on organizational health (Nielsen et al., 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007; Semedo et al., 2022). While existing approaches to studying toxic leadership offered a broad understanding of the topic, they have not delved into employees' experiences within public sectors. The lack of focus on the public sector industry or the employees' accounts of toxic leadership was a notable area for improvement in the current body of research. Reviewing and synthesizing the existing literature revealed a clear relationship; however, there is still a gap in specific sectors such as the state sector in Texas. I aimed to fill these gaps with this review, employing the BTT as a meaningful framework to uncover the psychological impacts of toxic leadership.

Related Studies

Quantitative studies have revealed a clear association between toxic leadership and increased employee stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al., 2022; Skogstad et al., 2007). These studies used surveys to gauge the direct psychological impact of toxic leadership behaviors. Other studies have focused on betrayal trauma resulting from toxic leadership, finding a correlation with symptoms of dissociation among employees (Chana et al., 2021; Gobin & Freyd, 2017; Platt et al., 2017; Platt & Fred, 2015). These studies collectively enhanced the understanding of the mental health consequences of toxic leadership. However, they suggested further, more specific sector-focused research to thoroughly comprehend and address these issues. Existing studies provided valuable insights into the negative impacts of toxic leadership on employee mental health. However, more qualitative research needs to focus on the direct experiences of employees who have faced such leadership challenges. Though the quantitative method allowed researchers to generalize the findings to a broader population, contributing to the overall understanding of the topic, quantitative methods often fail to capture the complexity and nuance of individual experiences, as they typically rely on predefined categories and scales. The reliance on self-reporting in surveys can lead to biases in the data. The literature called for an in-depth exploration of these personal experiences, particularly in specific settings like Texas state agencies, to enhance understanding of the complex nature of toxic leadership and its effects on mental well-being. This gap highlighted the need for more qualitative studies focusing on the employee's voice. By incorporating a qualitative approach, researchers can explore the

emotional, social, and psychological aspects of the problem, providing a more holistic view.

Selection Justification

The selection of the concepts of toxic leadership and employee mental well-being was justified by the extensive literature that highlights the negative impacts of toxic leadership on various aspects of employee health and organizational performance. For instance, researchers have explored the connection between toxic leadership and employee mental health outcomes (Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al., 2022; Skogstad et al., 2007). Research has shown how toxic leadership intensifies social and economic inequalities, particularly affecting vulnerable groups in the workplace (Nielsen et al., 2022). The broader social issues stemming from such leadership include increased incidents of domestic violence and substance abuse (Semedo et al., 2022). These studies underscore the far-reaching effects of toxic leadership beyond the workplace, affecting societal well-being and contributing to social problems. Additionally, toxic leadership affects employee satisfaction and organizational commitment (Indradevi, 2016). This type of leadership can also lead to decreased employee engagement, higher turnover rates, increased operation costs, and reduced productivity (Saleem et al., 2022). Toxic leadership behaviors lead to feelings of betrayal and violation of trust, which have profound impacts on employee mental health and organizational commitment (Black & Mancini, 2022; Brewer, 2021; Mahlangu, 2021). Thus, the existing literature justified the selection of the concepts of toxic leadership and employee mental well-being and the use of BTT as a theoretical framework.

Synthesis

The domain of organizational studies, especially when addressing toxic leadership, have challenged and expanded the traditional perspectives on workplace dynamics. For instance, research uncovered a direct and significant correlation between toxic leadership behaviors and employee emotional exhaustion (Aryee et al., 2008). This revelation established a clear link between the nature of leadership and the psychological well-being of employees. Other researchers broadened the understanding of what constitutes toxic leadership, exploring the day-to-day experiences of toxic leadership (Ashforth, 1997). These subtle forms of negative leadership, often less noticeable and more challenging to pinpoint, cumulatively impact job satisfaction and morale. Seemingly minor actions and attitudes of leadership, when consistent and pervasive, can create an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and demoralization among employees. This aspect of toxic leadership often goes unrecognized and unaddressed in organizational policies and interventions.

Building on the insights provided by Aryee et al. (2008) and Ashforth (1997), Aubrey's (2012) study further extended the discourse on toxic leadership into the realm of structured environments, exemplified by the military. Aubrey's exploration was particularly significant as it highlights how hierarchical systems, often found in structured environments like the military or government agencies, can amplify the effects of toxic leadership. Aubrey's work points to the fact that toxic leadership was not confined to corporate settings; instead, it was a pervasive problem that can significantly impact several types of organizations, each with unique structural dynamics. Aubrey's

exploration into the military context provided a crucial parallel to understanding the experiences of employees in structures and hierarchical organizations such as Texas state agencies. The military, known for its rigid hierarchy and strict discipline, offered a compelling backdrop to examine how toxic leadership can be exacerbated by and intertwined with the organization's structural elements. This insight was vital for the central research question of this study, as it suggested that the hierarchical nature of these organizations might similarly magnify the impact of toxic leadership in Texas state agencies. Aubrey's findings implied that in such structured environments, the authoritarian position of leaders intensified the adverse effects of their toxic behaviors. Employees in these settings experienced a heightened sense of powerlessness or fear of reappraisal, making it more challenging to confront or mitigate the impact of toxic leadership. This perspective was needed to understand the unique dynamics at play in Texas state agencies. It provided a basis for exploring how employees describe and navigate their experiences of toxic leadership. Thus, Aubrey (2012) complemented the broader narrative on toxic leadership by emphasizing the importance of organizational structure in shaping employees' experiences under toxic leadership. This perspective provided an understanding of the experiences of Texas state employees, as it highlights that their encounters with toxic leadership were influenced by not just behaviors of leadership, but also by inherent characteristics of the organizational environment in which they operate. The structured nature of many state agencies has layered hierarchies and defined chains of command; therefore, it created conditions where toxic leadership can take foot and flourish, impacting employees in unique ways. Aubrey's insights

suggested that for Texas state employees, the experience of toxic leadership could be compounded by systemic attributes of their workplace, making it more challenging to address or escape these negative influences.

Adding to the understanding of the interplay between individual behaviors and systemic factors under toxic leadership, as highlighted by Aubrey (2012), the research of Bamberger and Bacharach (2006) focused on the personal coping mechanisms that employees develop in response to such environments. Bamberger and Bacharach's study revealed how the detrimental effects of toxic leadership often transcend professional boundaries, compelling employees to adopt maladaptive behaviors, such as problem drinking, as a means of coping. This light was pivotal in understanding the profound personal toll that toxic leadership can exact on individuals, going beyond workplace dissatisfaction to impacting personal health and well-being.

Bamberger and Bacharach's (2006) findings are central to addressing this study's research questions. Their work suggests that the impact of toxic leadership was not confined to the professional sphere but spills over into personal lives, affecting employees' coping strategies and overall well-being. This perspective underscored the necessity of exploring the direct experiences of toxic leadership at work and the broader personal implications for employees. Understanding these personal coping mechanisms was needed to comprehensively address the research question, as it sheds light on the depth and severity of toxic leadership's impact on individuals, highlighting that the consequences extend beyond the immediate workplace environment. Employees resorted to behaviors like problem drinking signifies a deeper level of distress, which can provide

valuable insights into the intensity of their experiences under toxic leadership. Bamberger and Bacharach's (2006) study contributed significantly to understanding the multi-dimensional nature of toxic leadership's impact on the experiences of Texas state employees, as it goes beyond surface-level descriptions and offers a complete picture of the ramifications of toxic leadership within state agencies. Understanding these coping mechanisms underscored the need for effective organizational strategies and support systems to mitigate the potential for coping mechanisms that harm personal well-being and are more inclined to have a negative socio-economic impact.

Continuing from the exploration of personal coping mechanisms, the work of Bell (2017), Bernstein and Freyd (2014), and Bhandarkar and Rai (2019) offered a perspective into the emotional and psychological landscape sculpted by toxic leadership. Bell's research on follower effectiveness examined the direct impact of toxic leadership on employee performance, shedding light on how such leadership can undermine the capabilities and productivity of subordinates. This aspect provided an understanding of the broader effects of toxic leadership on organizational outcomes and employee development. Bernstein and Freyd's application of Betrayal Trauma Theory introduced the perspective that the experiences of toxic leadership can be akin to a form of betrayal trauma. This theory helped understand the deep-seated emotional and psychological scars that toxic leadership can leave on employees, affecting their trust in leadership and the organization. It provided a framework for understanding the intensity and complexity of the emotional response that employees may experience under toxic leadership, including feelings of betrayal, loss of trust, and emotional upheaval. Bhandarkar and Rai (2019)

further contributed to this narrative by focusing on the emotional distress and coping strategies employed by employees under toxic leadership. Their study highlighted the various psychological responses and defense mechanisms that employees develop to manage the stress and anxiety induced by toxic work environments. This helped paint a comprehensive picture of how toxic leadership affects not just the professional responsibilities of employees but also their emotional and psychological well-being.

Together, these studies enriched the understanding of the multifaceted impacts of toxic leadership. They revealed the complex psychological dynamics at play, encompassing the reduction in employee effectiveness, the betrayal and emotional trauma experienced, and the diverse coping strategies employed to manage these challenges. This comprehensive view was particularly relevant to the central research question of this study, as it suggested that the experiences of Texas state employees with toxic leadership encompassed a range of emotional and psychological reactions. These insights were essential for comprehensively addressing the experiences of Texas state employees encountering toxic leadership. By acknowledging the emotional and psychological dimensions, this research approach enabled a deeper understanding of toxic leadership's impact on individuals. This perspective helped devise effective organizational strategies and support systems to address professional repercussions and emotional and psychological ramifications.

While enriched by studies on multiple impacts, the discourse on toxic leadership had its areas of controversy and contention. Controversy existed regarding the nature and definition of toxic leadership. While some researchers focused on specific behaviors such

as bullying and abuse, others take a holistic approach, considering the overall impact of the leaders' behavior on organizational culture and employee well-being (Skogstad et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2011). Gaps in the existing literature needed to be addressed, and more qualitative research was needed to explore the lived experiences of employees subjected to toxic leadership behaviors. Most of the existing studies focused on organizational performance outcomes and did not provide a comprehensive perspective on the mental well-being of employees (Semedo et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2011). Lastly, research was lacking on the effects of toxic leadership in the state sector of Texas, which this study addressed.

Additionally, this controversy was exemplified in the works of Franken and Plimmer (2019) and Kilic and Günsel (2019), which challenged traditional narratives by shedding light on the nuanced aspects of toxic leadership, particularly in the public sector. These studies expanded the understanding of toxic leadership, demonstrating that its harmful effects are not limited to overtly abusive behaviors but also included more subtle forms of leadership, such as passive inadequacy or neglect.

Franken and Plimmer (2019) focused on the unique characteristics of toxic leadership in the public sector, an area distinct from its private sector counterpart. They unveiled that toxic leadership often transcends the boundaries of overt aggression or blatant misconduct in such settings. Instead, it manifested subtly, yet significantly, through a failure to provide practical, ethical, and responsible leadership. This subtler form of toxicity, characterized by deficiencies in ethical decision-making, transparency, and integrity, was equally, if not more, damaging than its overt counterparts, according to

Franke and Plimmer (2019).

The absence of ethical and responsible leadership had grave implications in the public sector, where the stewardship of public resources and community interests are paramount. Franken and Plimmer's findings illuminate how such leadership shortfalls- encompassing neglect of employee welfare, poor decision-making, and lack of ethical conduct- eroded public trust, demoralized the workforce, and lead to subpar public services. This form of toxic leadership, marked by what leaders fail to do, posed a significant challenge due to its less apparent nature, making it a more insidious threat to organizational health and public service efficacy.

For this study, focused on the experiences of Texas state employees with toxic leadership, Franken and Plimmer's insights were particularly relevant. They suggested that the experiences of these employees may not only be shaped by the explicit actions of their leaders but also by their omissions and failures in leadership. This included issues like inadequate communication, insufficient support, failure to advocate for employees, and neglect in fostering ethical work environments. Such a perspective was crucial for thoroughly understanding the experiences of Texas state employees, as it encompasses the full spectrum of toxic leadership behaviors, both active and passive, and their impact on the workplace.

Similarly, Kilic and Günsel (2019) further deepened our understanding of the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership and its varied impacts on employees. Their exploration was particularly insightful, underscoring the broad spectrum of consequences stemming from toxic leadership behaviors. Their research was not limited to a singular

aspect of the employee experience but spanned several critical areas, including job satisfaction, mental health, and overall workplace engagement.

Kilic and Gungel (2019) revealed that the harm caused by toxic leadership manifested in numerous ways, affecting employees on both personal and professional levels. For instance, the decline in job satisfaction linked to toxic leadership went beyond discontent with work tasks; it often reflected a more profound disillusionment with the organization's culture and loss of alignment with organizational values. This aspect suggested that the impact of toxic leadership eroded the very foundations of an employee's relationship with their work and organization. Moreover, Kili and Gungels' focused on mental health was particularly significant. It highlighted that the repercussions of toxic leadership extended into the psychological well-being of employees, manifested in increased stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. This insight pointed to the long-term health implications of prolonged exposure to toxic leadership, necessitating a broader approach to employee support and well-being.

Kilic and Gungel's (2019) research provided an essential perspective for this study's research question. Texas state employees' experiences of toxic leadership encompassed a wide range of effects, from job dissatisfaction to severe mental health issues and a decline in workplace engagement. Understanding these varied impacts was crucial for comprehensively addressing the experiences of these employees and developing strategies that not only mitigated the effects of toxic leadership but also fostered a healthy and supportive work environment.

Franken and Plimmer (2019) and Kilic and Gungel (2019) added a layer of

complexity to the understanding of toxic leadership, highlighting that its identification and mitigation could be more straightforward. They underscored the need for a more intricate approach to studying and addressing toxic leadership, taking into consideration the several ways it can manifest and affect employees. This insight was particularly relevant to this study, as it suggested that the experiences of Texas state employees with toxic leadership might be varied and complex, influenced by both the actions and inactions of their leaders. These aspects were essential for developing a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the challenges posed by toxic leadership in state agencies.

The relationship between toxic leadership and employee mental well-being was well-established in the literature, with multiple studies confirming the adverse effects of toxic leadership behaviors on various aspects of employee health and organizational performance. Toxic leadership was characterized by abusive, autocratic, and self-centered behaviors that led to diminished employee performance, increased stress, and poor mental health outcomes (Black & Mancini, 2022; Brewer, 2021; Mahlangu, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al., 2022; Skogstad et al., 2007). These behaviors resulted in employees experiencing negative symptoms, such as lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and disengagement, often leading them to adopt coping strategies, such as avoidance or adaptation to maintain employment and manage their interactions with toxic leaders (Lindblom & Gray, 2010). This violation of trust between employees and leaders was linked to traumatic experiences and symptoms of dissociation (Chan et al., 2021; Gobin & Freyd, 2017; Platt et al., 2017; Platt & Fred, 2015).

Johnston et al. (2022) offered an exploration into the impacts of toxic leadership, particularly emphasizing the mental health repercussions in high-stress work environments. Their research went beyond the conventional scope of job dissatisfaction and morale, exploring how the quality of leadership and organizational culture intricately influenced the mental well-being of employees. In their study, they conducted a comprehensive survey of correctional workers in Canada and found the prevalence of mental health disorders within their population. It shed light on how structural barriers within the organization, including aspects of leadership and workplace culture, impeded access to necessary mental health support and treatment. These barriers exacerbated the symptoms and prolonged them, indicating deeper, systemic issues related to workplace well-being and leadership.

One of the critical contributions of Johnston et al. (2022) was the emphasis on the need for a comprehensive approach to mental health support within organizations. Their findings suggested that addressing the mental health of employees requires a change in basic assumptions at the organizational level, one that acknowledged and actively addressed the sources of stress, including toxic leadership. This involved improving various aspects of the work environment, such as work and schedule structures, manager-staff relations, and changes to the physical work setting, to foster better mental health outcomes. Johnston et al. (2022) findings were relevant to this study's research questions, as their study suggested that encounters with toxic leadership can lead to a complex mix of professional frustrations and mental health concerns. The study highlighted the need for organizational strategies to address both professional and personal dimensions of

employee well-being. This broader perspective helped develop effective interventions in high-stress public sector environments, where the impact of toxic leadership on mental health can be exceptionally high.

The research questions central to this study focused on understanding the impacts of toxic leadership on employee mental health and job satisfaction within the state sector of Texas. A significant body of literature, as outlined in previous sections, explored the relationship between toxic leadership and various negative outcomes in various organizational settings, such as increased stress, anxiety, and turnover rates (Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al., 2022). However, the current literature lacked a focused examination of these dynamics within the context of the state sector in Texas, and existing studies have relied on quantitative methods to assess the impacts of toxic leadership, often overlooking the insights that can be gained from qualitative research. By employing a qualitative approach, I aimed to fill these gaps by capturing the lived experiences of individuals subjected to toxic leadership within the Texas state sector.

This approach was meaningful, enabled more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics existing in toxic leadership scenarios. Through interviews and thematic analysis, I uncovered specific challenges and stressors faced by employees in the state sector of Texas, providing valuable insight that can inform the development of targeted interventions and policies to mitigate the negative impacts of toxic leadership behaviors, increasing overall positive mental health outcomes and job satisfaction.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature consistently illuminated significant themes, particularly the

compelling link between toxic leadership and the mental well-being of employees. Numerous studies have underscored this relationship by emphasizing the correlation between detrimental leadership behaviors, such as bullying and harassment, and the resultant adverse mental health outcomes experienced by employees (Sing et al., 2018). These outcomes encompassed a spectrum of challenges, including heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Nielsen et al., 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007).

These harmful leadership practices extended beyond merely affecting employees' emotional well-being; they also cast a pervasive shadow over their overall performance and engagement within the workplace. Semedo et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive analysis that found toxic leadership exerts a tangible and detrimental influence on employee performance, often leading to a significant decline in engagement levels. Employees subjected to toxic leadership frequently grappled with consequences such as diminished self-esteem, heightened apprehension, and disengagement.

To navigate these challenging work environments, employees frequently resorted to various coping strategies, including avoidance and adaptation, to maintain their employment and manage their interactions with toxic leaders (Lindblom & Gray, 2010). However, these adaptive measures were exacerbated by the stress and emotional toll experienced by employees. Beyond the individual impacts, toxic leadership had far-reaching socioeconomic implications for organizations and society. Not only did toxic leadership lead to decreased productivity and heightened employee turnover, but it also contributed to increased healthcare costs, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups and perpetuating social and economic disparities (Nielsen et al., 2011; Semedo et al.,

2022).

Notable gaps remained in literature. For instance, more qualitative research was needed to explore the lived experiences of employees subjected to toxic leadership behaviors, shedding light on the emotional and psychological toll of such experiences (Semedo et al., 2022). Additionally, existing research lacked a focused exploration of specific sectors, such as the state sector of Texas, which may exhibit unique dynamics related to toxic leadership and its impacts on employee mental health. Additionally, while BTT was used to understand the psychological impacts of toxic leadership, there was potential for further exploration of how BTT can be applied to comprehend the complexities of toxic leadership in diverse workplace settings (Black & Mancini, 2022; Brewer, 2021; Malahngu, 2021).

Building on the identified gaps in the literature, specifically the lack of qualitative focus on the lived experiences of employees subjected to toxic leadership behaviors in the state sector of Texas, Chapter 3 provided the methodology and methods employed to address these gaps. Through a comprehensive and systematic approach, Chapter 3 outlined the steps taken to collect and analyze data, ensuring the study provides an in-depth understanding of the impacts of toxic leadership on employees' mental well-being. By employing qualitative methods, such as interviews and thematic analysis, Chapter 3 shed light on the unique experiences of individuals in the state sector of Texas, contributing to the body of knowledge on toxic leadership.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the adverse effects of toxic leadership on employees' mental health and the potential contributions it can make to clinical psychology and industrial-organizational psychology. I aimed to improve the understanding of the harm caused by toxic leadership and provide empirical evidence with employee experiences to support the risks to employee mental health. Another aim was to generate practical suggestions for mitigating toxic leadership and promoting employee well-being, company success, and economic wealth.

In this chapter, I present information on the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness, including ethical considerations. I also provide details on gathering data and analysis procedures. I provide a population sample and recruitment strategies, offer any instrumentation used, and summarize the main points of interest.

Research Design and Rationale

A basic qualitative approach was the best approach for gaining insight into employees' experiences with toxic leadership and their perception of how it affected their mental health by allowing for a deeper understanding of personal and subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative methodology allowed for collecting rich and detailed data, providing a deep understanding of the topic and the nuances of employee experiences. A basic qualitative approach is beneficial when studying sensitive or stigmatized topics, such as mental health, as it allows participants to share their experiences in their own words and a safe environment (Brannen, 2016; Patton, 2002).

Using open-ended questions in the interview process allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, revealing important insights that may not be captured in closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2013; Brannen, 2016; Patton, 2002). Open-ended questions do not have a predetermined set of answers; therefore, the answers participants provided are authentic and original. Open-ended questions assisted in probing and following up on exciting or unexpected responses (Neuman, 2014). Open-ended questions allow the researcher to explore sensitive and potentially stigmatized topics non-threateningly (Flick, 2018), which is critical to obtain for a topic such as toxic leadership. It is also important to create a safe space when collecting data around stigmatized topics (Bryman, 2016). Mental health is still a stigmatized topic; therefore, the basic qualitative approach using semi-structured one-on-one interviews created a nonthreatening environment and allowed the participant to take the time to discuss the topic. Another reason for this interview method was that it allowed for the exploration of the personal and subjective experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2014). This is important in toxic leadership; understanding employee mental health may be influenced by the employee's perceptions and subjective experiences of the leadership behavior (Einarsen et al., 2011). The data collected from this study provide a detailed examination of the specific context and unique factors that contributed to the employee's experiences with toxic leadership. It can also help inform the development of interventions and strategies to reduce toxic leadership and promote positive leadership practices (Cameron, 2008).

Researcher's Role

As the researcher in this study, I took on the role of an observer-participant, which involved observing and participating in the study. As an observer-participant, I actively collected data by asking open-ended questions and listened carefully to participants' answers. I took an active role in understanding the narratives provided by the participants while observing their responses. This approach allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives while maintaining the objectivity and credibility of the researcher (Flick, 2014; Nelson et al., 2015; Spradley, 2016).

My experience as a state employee and former supervisor did not influence the study results. I knew this was a potential for bias and managed it by adhering to established data collection and analysis procedures and critically examined my subjective experiences and interpretations. To minimize the potential for bias and maintain the validity of the results, I ensured all participants were fully informed of my background and any potential conflicts of interest.

Methodology

Participant Selection and Recruitment

This study's participant population comprised of individuals within state agencies who have experienced toxic leadership. The sampling strategy involved purposive sampling to select participants based on their exposure to toxic leadership, ensuring they met the specific criteria relevant to the study's focus (see Creswell, 2014). I employed purposive sampling to select participants from Texas state organizations who have

experienced toxic leadership (see Schmidt, 2008). This approach was supplemented by snowball sampling to broaden the participant pool through referrals from initial subjects, thereby enriching the diversity and depth of the data collected. Snowball sampling is a nonrandom sampling method where the researcher started with a small number of participants and asked them to recruit additional participants (Sedgwick, 2013). To ensure the study's validity and mitigate bias, the participant pool consisted of individuals with whom I have no direct relationship. This approach guaranteed more objective data collection, as personal connections could influence participant's responses. A screening questionnaire was used to identify eligible participants, ensuring a transparent and unbiased selection process for this research (see Schmidt, 2008). The selection criteria are (a) participants must have at least 1 year of experience at a Texas state agency; (b) participants must have worked under leadership exhibiting specific toxic behaviors as outlined by Schmidt (2008), rather than relying solely on subjective perceptions of toxicity; (c) participants should have perceived the impacts of toxic leadership on employee well-being.

The sampling method aimed for a specific, not necessarily significant, number of participants to explore varied experiences of toxic leadership deeply. In this context, a "representative" sample referred to a range of experiences reflecting different intensities and impacts of toxic leadership. The goal captured a spectrum of perspectives, rather than quantifying prevalence, to understand the nuances and varied effects of toxic leadership within state organizations. Qualitative studies benefit from small, focused populations to gather rich, valid data (Ritchie et al., 2014). The sample size was determined by reaching

the saturation point of eight participants. At this point, additional interviews no longer yielded new insights into toxic leadership's specific dimensions and impacts in Texas state organizations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This focused approach ensured that the collected data was representative and detailed, providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of toxic leadership in this government context.

Data Collection Instruments and Sources

I employed a researcher-produced interview protocol to explore the personal narratives of employees who experienced toxic leadership within Texas state agencies (see Appendix B). The protocol was designed to include open-ended questions encouraging participants to share their experiences. These questions were based on BTT and toxic leadership principles, aiming to explore their direct connections to well-being. Although this interview protocol was novel and developed explicitly for this study, it followed the established qualitative research methodologies to ensure its efficacy and reliability.

I used the observation sheets in Appendix C to complement the verbal interview data. These sheets were instrumental for documenting nonverbal cues and the physical context during interviews, providing additional layers of data analysis. Combining these qualitative tools yielded a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. Audio recordings served as another data collection tool, capturing the interviews. This allowed for accurate verbatim transcription and detailed analysis, preserving the authenticity of the participants' voices and ensuring the integrity of the data collected.

Upon completion of the study, participants received a debriefing to understand the

context of their contributions and how their anonymity was preserved. Once research is concluded and published, any identifiable information will be securely destroyed. These measures are in place to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the information shared. Demographic details, such as gender, ethnicity, and number of years in a position, were included in the final results. However, specific care was taken to present this information in an aggregated and generalized manner that prevents readers from deducing the identity of any individual participant.

Issues with Trustworthiness

The data collection instruments for this study were meticulously designed to capture a comprehensive understanding of participant's experiences with toxic leadership. The researcher-produced interview protocol (Appendix B) forms the backbone, featuring open-ended questions rooted in Betrayal Trauma Theory and toxic leadership principles, directly exploring their connections to well-being. Complementing this was observations sheets (Appendix C) document nonverbal cues and contextual details during interviews, adding depth to the analysis. The screening questionnaire (Appendix A), based on Schmidt's criteria, ensured a transparent and unbiased participant selection process. These instruments collectively contributed to a robust qualitative approach, allowing for the nuanced exploration of into toxic leadership on employee well-being while addressing content validity and cultural considerations within the specific organization.

In terms of cultural considerations and the handling of exclusion justifications with respect and without marginalization or stigma, there were no explicit exclusions in

the participant selection process, and all potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria will be considered. Further, the criteria focused on relevant experiences with toxic leadership within Texas state agencies rather than personal characteristics. The selection process aimed to be inclusive, ensuring that individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives are represented. Any potential exclusion was based on the participant's failure to meet the specific criteria related to experiences with toxic leadership in Texas state agencies, not personal characteristics. The handling of participant inclusion or exclusion was conducted respectfully and without marginalization or stigma, emphasizing fairness and equal considerations for eligible participants.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, protecting participant rights was paramount (APA, 2017). An interview screening protocol was employed to ensure the participants' rights are well protected at the start of the study (Appendix A). To ensure confidentiality, I used pseudonyms and secure data storage (see Creswell, 2014). All interview recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices, and access was restricted to the research team and was treated with the utmost discretion. Consent forms and any identifying documents were stored separately from the study data. When findings are reported or presented, care was taken to ensure that any details that may identify a participant are either omitted or generalized. Participants were given the opportunity to review the material for potential identification risks before publication.

Beyond standard ethical practices, the potential for emotional distress to participants when discussing their experiences with toxic leadership was another ethical

consideration; therefore, on the consent form, I provided participants with contact information for 211-Texas, an informational site that helps individuals locate free and cost-effective resources like counseling and community support. I ensured the interviews were conducted in a safe, nonthreatening space where participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Morse, 1994).

Lastly, recognizing the importance of communication findings in an accessible manner, the dissemination plan included a brief audience-appropriate format tailored for participants. Elements of the plan included a participant feedback session: upon completion of the study a dedicated session will be organized to provide participants with an overview of the key findings. The session offered an opportunity for participants to engage with and provide feedback on the results. A concise and comprehensible summary report was created for community stakeholders. The report distilled the main findings and implications in a format that was accessible to a broader audience. Key findings were translated into plain language summaries to enhance accessibility. These summaries ensured stakeholders can easily understand and engage in the research outcomes.

Summary

Using qualitative research methodology, I sought to understand the lived experiences of employees in the state sector of Texas who believe they have been subjected to toxic leadership. I intended to illuminate the intricate realities and subtle dimensions of such encounters. I guided participants through the informed consent process and nurtured the environment for data collection to ensure a secure and

reassuring atmosphere conducive to open sharing. To uphold the highest academic and ethical rigor standards, I included a meticulous review process, obtaining clearance from the IRB. I employed the scrutiny of domain experts, including a clinical psychologist and an industrial-organizational psychologist, alongside input from program directors in the field of psychology. These precautions were intended to minimize potential emotional discomfort for participants and guaranteed a diverse and representative sample.

Methodologically, I anchored the study using qualitative tools designed for this context, including a bespoke interview protocol, the strategic use of observation sheets (Appendix C), and the systematic recording of interviews for a comprehensive qualitative analysis. Where necessary, the research was supplemented with trusted historical or legal documents for added context. Collectively, through these approaches, I aimed to thoroughly examine the psychological repercussions of toxic leadership experienced by employees. I expected insights from this research to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and support the development of targeted interventions.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the psychological and physical impacts of toxic leadership on Texas state employees, including how such experiences affect employee well-being. The findings of this study will help bridge the literature gap on the harms caused by toxic leadership and highlight the necessity of addressing toxic leadership behaviors. The aim is to generate practical insights that can help mitigate toxic leadership and promote employee well-being, company success, and economic wealth.

This chapter describes the study settings, participants' demographics, and the process used to collect the research data. The chapter also outlines the process used to analyze research data in terms of planning, organization, transcribing, storing, analyzing, and coding of the information gathered from the research participants. Evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is also discussed, followed by a comprehensive review of the study results. The chapter concludes by summarizing the main themes and insights gleaned from the participant narratives.

Setting

I contacted study participants a week before the study through email and attached the research consent form (Appendix D). Each participant was informed about their rights as study participants, including their right to withdraw from the study at any moment without notice or repercussions. I also disclosed the potential conflict of interest as having previously worked for the State of Texas and promised to remain objective during

the study. Current Texas state employees who have worked for the agencies for at least 1 year (see Appendix A) were invited to participate in the research interview through Zoom. Before the interview, I ensured each participant had familiarity with how to use Zoom video meetings and had a strong internet connection at home. During the data collection period, some participants rescheduled their interviews due to poor connectivity, technical challenges, and distractions caused by family members. Some participants were rescheduled for the interview based on their availability and were given another date and time more suitable to their schedule. No events interfered with research participation, and all interested volunteers were able to participate at times and dates that suited their schedules.

Demographics

Only eight research participants were interviewed for the study. Study participants were required to meet the inclusion criteria of being above 18 years of age, having worked in a Texas state agency for at least 1 year, and having worked under a leadership exhibiting specific toxic behaviors (see Schmidt, 2008). There were five females and three males, with age ranges between 25 and 55. These participants had experience in the following departments: the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS), the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), the University of Texas (UT), and Texas Community College.

Data Collection

While 17 study participants met the study inclusion criteria, only eight

participants were available for interviews, leading to a response rate of 47%. Research data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the eight study participants per the research interview protocol (Appendix B). The interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform that allows users to interact via video, audio, and chat. The use of Zoom meetings enhanced convenience and safety for the study participants and also made it easier to record interview proceedings.

Before the interview, consent forms were emailed to each study participant and each participant responded, thus providing their consent to participate in the study. Interviews were scheduled at a frequency of four to five interviews per week, spread out over a period of 2 weeks/months to accommodate participant availability. The planned interview duration was approximately one hour; however, the actual interviews averaged one hour and ten minutes to allow participants ample time to share their experiences in depth. I was in a home office for all eight interviews, which is a private space with a closed door and no one else was in the house during the interviews; this helped enhance confidentiality and protect the participants' anonymity.

All interview sessions were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants. Recordings were stored securely on a password-protected cloud storage platform per IRB procedures. Notably, Zoom allows meeting hosts to record meetings, with the encrypted data saved in the Zoom cloud and only accessible to the host or other permitted users. This approach ensured data security while facilitating remote data collection. Studies indicate that data stored in the cloud is more secure due to multifactor authentication, automatic security updates and multiple backups (Hassan et al., 2022).

Research participants were not required to turn on their videos or share their names or other identifying information during the interview process for privacy purposes.

Additionally, I used an observation sheet (see Appendix C) to record nonverbal cues and the physical context during interviews.

There were slight variations from the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3. One major variation is that the research had planned for at least 10 participants but only managed to interview eight participants. However, after interviewing seven to eight participants and finding no new information, saturation was reached. Another slight variation is that I had planned to conduct both in-person and through video conferencing. However, due to unforeseeable circumstances, it was not feasible to conduct in-person interviews. There were no other notable variations or unusual circumstances during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Following the conclusion of the interviews, I proceeded to transcribe the interviews and compile transcriptions for data analysis. Zoom facilitated this by providing transcripts from the meeting, with a few discrepancies based on pronunciation. It was vital to listen to the recorded interview and compare the transcript with the observation sheet to ensure I captured both verbal and nonverbal cues.

Thematic analysis, a method commonly used in qualitative research, aims to provide researchers with a deeper understanding of the meanings and patterns from participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012); therefore, I began analyzing interview transcripts to identify common themes while paying attention to patterns or

statements that might have similar meanings or messages depending on the context.

Attention was also given to patterns or statements that might carry similar meanings or messages, depending on the context.

The analysis of the collected data was an inductive process that began with the coding of individual units and progressively moved towards identifying broader categories and themes. Initially, behaviors indicative of toxic leadership such as communication issues, control and autonomy, leadership self-interest, consistency, and predictability were identified and coded. These specific behaviors were subsequently classified into five distinct types of toxic leadership: narcissism, abusive supervision, authoritarian, self-promotion, and unpredictability.

To develop themes and categories, the following steps were employed. I first reviewed the interview transcripts and observation sheets, highlighting terms that appeared significant based on the literature review and research questions. Similar phrases were then grouped into codes to simplify the analysis process. These codes were clustered into expansive categories, which helped in the thematic development of data. This approach ensured a structured progression from specific coded data to broader thematic insights, capturing the complexities of leadership and its effect.

In addition to the dominant themes, the analysis also considered discrepant cases which provided unique insights diverging from the common patterns. For instance, one participant described personal growth under an authoritarian leader, highlighting how strict control and high demands led to their development. Another participant viewed unpredictability not as a detriment but as a catalyst for team adaptability and creativity.

These outliers were thoroughly examined, and their narratives were included to enrich the understanding of the data, acknowledging the nuances of individual experiences within the boarder context of toxic leadership. This approach ensured that the analysis captured both the predominant trends and the exceptional cases, providing a well-rounded interpretation of the data.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The study meticulously adhered to and, where necessary, adapted the methodologies detailed in Chapter 3, ensuring a robust foundation for its trustworthiness. These adjustments, aimed at addressing practical challenges and enriching the data's depth, allowed the research to capture the complex effects of toxic leadership on Texas state employees with precision and sensitivity. By maintaining a high standard of methodological integrity and prioritizing participant perspectives, the research offers significant insights into the dynamics of toxic leadership, contributing valuable knowledge to both clinical and organizational psychology disciplines.

Credibility was enhanced through the member-checking process. Following each interview, participants were offered the flexibility to review their transcripts at their convenience. This step allowed them to verify the accuracy of their statements and provide additional insights, thereby enriching the data and ensuring its authentic representation of their experiences. Adjustments were made to give participants the option to review their transcript at the end of the interview, which they could decline if they chose not to. None of the participants requested changes to their transcripts, and three decided against reviewing their transcript altogether. To further enhance credibility,

interview questions were emailed to participants upon request before the interview. This approach allowed them to prepare and reflect on their experiences, potentially leading to richer and more nuanced responses during the interview.

Transferability was addressed by documenting the research context and the participants' backgrounds. Descriptions of the organizational settings, roles, tenure, and personal experiences with leadership were detailed, providing future researchers with the necessary information to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. To enhance transferability, additional follow-up interviews were conducted to capture deeper insights into the participants' experiences, further enriching the data's contextual depth. This approach aimed to facilitate a broader understanding and applicability of the study's findings.

Dependability, the ability to replicate the study and achieve similar results, was achieved through exhaustive documentation. This involved meticulously recording every step of the research process, from the initial planning stages through data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This comprehensive documentation trail provides transparency and facilitates the replication or continuation of the study by future researchers. Furthermore, all adjustments made to the predefined methodology outlined in Chapter 3 were documented, ensuring a transparent and reliable research process.

Confirmability was achieved by carefully documenting the analytical journey, from the initial coding of data to the final synthesis of themes. The rationale behind the thematic development and interpretative decisions was explicitly outlined, ensuring findings were traceable back to the data. When adjustments were necessary—for

example, to incorporate emerging themes not initially anticipated—these were examined against the data to confirm they were not influenced by the researcher’s biases but were genuinely reflective of the participants’ experiences.

Results

The raw research data was captured from participant’s experiences with toxic leadership within their agencies, and how these experiences have shaped their well-being. Analyzing the data revealed patterns, themes, and some discrepant narratives, all of which were documented through direct quotes and supported by data tables. The following information denotes the themes noted based on the responses of the participants. The study sought to answer the central question: How do Texas state employees describe their experiences with toxic leadership?

Theme 1: Toxic Leadership Experiences

Participants were asked to describe and provide examples of their leadership experiences and at what time in their tenure they witnessed such behaviors. All participants agreed that they had experienced at least one leadership behavior exhibiting specific toxic behaviors as defined by the Schmidt and Hanges (2008) scale. These negative experiences were characterized by a range of toxic leadership behaviors. All 8 participants who took the interview witnessed toxic leadership behaviors in their workplace during their first year in their respective agencies.

Table 1

Toxic Leadership Experiences

Theme	Code Specific Behavior	Example Quotes
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Toxic Leadership	Abusive Supervision	“Supervisor always makes me feel like I bring no value to the agency since I can be easily replaced.”
Toxic Leadership	Authoritarianism	“The relentless pressure and undermining from my supervisor left me in a constant state of anxiety.”
Toxic Leadership	Narcissism	“Our leaders always take credit for team success, which has made it difficult for me to be promoted.”
Toxic Leadership	Self-Promotion	“Supervisor would constantly yell at me in front of colleagues, making me feel belittled and afraid to make mistakes.”
Toxic Leadership	Unpredictability	“Our leader’s priorities shifted daily, making it impossible to plan or feel secure in our jobs.”

Theme 2: Erosion of Trust

Participants were asked to reflect on how their toxic leadership experiences changed their feelings toward leaders and authority figures. Participants consistently reported a significant decline in trust toward leadership, highlighting experiences of betrayal and disillusionment that affected their professional relationships and workplace engagement. For example, one participant recounted, “My trust in leadership has been deeply eroded due to a history of unfulfilled promises and manipulative actions by my superior.” These accounts underline the critical issues of trust erosion and perceived betrayal, emphasizing the personal impact on employees within the context of their organizations. Overall, all 8 study participants described having experienced diminished trust toward leadership and feeling vulnerable and betrayed. While summarizing this theme, some participants explained that they fear their leaders and often wish to have zero to no interaction with them during work hours. The history of toxic leadership has also increased suspicion of leadership actions as all participants explained, they do not believe that leaders have their best interests at heart.

Table 2 offers a detailed summary of participant responses that highlight the erosion of trust resulting from toxic leadership behaviors. The table categorizes specific

behaviors such as abusive supervision, authoritarianism, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictable, and pairs them with direct quotes from participants. These quotes vividly illustrate the personal and emotional impact of each type of behavior on the employee.

Table 2

Erosion of Trust by Toxic Leadership

Theme	Code Specific Behavior	Example Quotes
Erosion of Trust	Abusive Supervision	“My manager usually yells at me in front of everyone.”
Erosion of Trust	Authoritarianism	“Leaders never ask for our opinion and do not value our input in decision-making.”
Erosion of Trust	Narcissism	“Trust in leadership has been deeply eroded due to a history of unfulfilled promises and manipulative actions by my superior.”
Erosion of Trust	Self-Promotion	“Our leaders always make everything to be about them.”
Erosion of Trust	Unpredictability	“I never know how to interact with our boss. One time they are friendly and suddenly, they become unapproachable.”

Theme 3: Psychological Trauma

Research participants were asked to describe how their toxic leadership experiences affected different aspects of their lives and whether they have faced any societal challenges or difficulties due to such experiences. All 8 participants recognized the psychological trauma that followed being betrayed by their leaders, which was accelerated by the organizational acceptance of such toxic behaviors as normal.

Psychological impacts varied from anxiety, stress, depression, and burnout, with the silent struggle worsening the conditions. The participants gave the following examples:

Table 3 provides a summary of participant’s responses to the psychological impacts of toxic leadership. However, there were other discrepant descriptions, including physical health effects of toxic leadership such as “elevated blood pressure” caused by

“extreme anger” towards leaders that were not included in the current theme. Such discrepant descriptions, although unrealistic, indicate that leadership experiences might also have a negative impact on individual physical health. After all, mental health has a direct impact on physical health. Some participants also explained that the normalization of toxic leadership behaviors in the organization has made them less susceptible, although such behaviors affect them in other ways such as career stagnation.

Table 3

Psychological Trauma Caused by Toxic Leadership

Theme	Code Specific Behavior	Example Quotes
Psychological Trauma	Anxiety	“Before this, I was never one to struggle with health issues, yet the relentless stress at work began to take a toll, manifesting in both my physical and mental health.”
Psychological Trauma	Depression	“I often struggle to wake up in the morning when I think about my day. Work gives me extreme anxiety and it is not a place I would say I enjoy spending most of my time at.”
Psychological Trauma	Stress	“I’m constantly worried about what my boss will say or do next. I feel like I’m walking on eggshells all the time.” “Have trouble sleeping because I worry about work all the time”.
Psychological Trauma	Burnout	“I don’t see any way out of this situation. I feel trapped in this job with a terrible boss and have no hope for things to get better.” “I feel emotionally drained all the time. Dealing with the negativity and stress at work has left me with nothing left to give in my personal life.”

Theme 4: Work Dynamics

When describing how toxic leadership experience affected their feelings about their role and work environment and how this shaped their work behaviors, participants noted that such experiences increased work-related stress and led to work disengagement and overall lower motivation. Participants also noted that their experiences made them question their worth and capabilities and increased their thoughts about leaving their

organization for better opportunities. Furthermore, participants linked toxic leadership behaviors to professional growth stagnation and decline in organizational performance. Professional growth stagnation was one of the major reasons participants thought about leaving their current workplace since they did not feel valued and appreciated.

Table 4 provides a summary of the common themes related to workplace dynamics and toxic leadership behaviors. All participants viewed toxic leadership as the reason for professional growth stagnation and the perpetuation of toxic workplace culture. Because most followers emulate the behaviors of their leaders, toxic leadership contributes to the acceptance of toxic workplace behaviors. Some participants explained that they were highly thrilled to join the agency, although this changed after witnessing toxic leadership behaviors that went unreported since there was no one else to report to. Reporting toxic leadership behaviors often requires employees to relay their complaints to the same leader, which makes the effort counterintuitive.

Table 4

Impact of Toxic Leadership Behaviors on Work Dynamics

Theme	Code Specific Behavior	Example Quotes
Work Dynamics	Professional Growth Stagnation	“Witnessed talented colleagues leave the organization due to the negativity. This loss of expertise weakens our team and hinders our ability to function effectively.”
Work Dynamics	Perpetuation of Toxic Culture	“The agency by far qualifies as a toxic work environment. Sadly, this culture has been normalized by my co-workers and no one seems bothered.”
Work Dynamics	Thoughts about leaving	“I could leave the agency anytime soon if I found a better opportunity anywhere. Working here for three years now and I have not experienced any career growth.”
Work Dynamics	Diminished Organizational Performance	“After being constantly belittled by my manager, I started questioning my skills and abilities. I felt like I wasn’t good enough for this job and began looking for opportunities elsewhere where I could feel valued.”

Work Dynamics	Workplace Disengagement	“The toxic work environment created by our leader has led to low morale and decreased collaboration among team members. This has certainly been reflected in our recent project delays and missed deadlines.”
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Theme 5: Coping Strategies

Despite wanting to leave their current roles at the agency, all the study participants are still current employees. Study participants were asked to share some coping strategies and resources that have helped them deal with toxic leadership. Strategies ranged from seeking professional counseling and building support networks to changing roles or departments. These insights demonstrated the diverse and proactive measures employees adopt to counteract the negative effects of toxic leadership on their lives. However, participant responses indicate that the best survival tactic is to learn and adapt since toxic bosses exist everywhere, and quitting a job is not the optimal solution.

Table 5

Coping Strategies

Theme	Code Specific Behavior	Example Quotes
Coping Strategies	Professional Counselling	“I’ve found that seeking therapy has been incredibly helpful in processing the emotional toll of dealing with toxic leadership. Having a neutral professional to talk to has provided me with valuable insights and coping mechanisms to navigate challenging situations at work.”
Coping Strategies	Support Networks	“Building a support network has been essential for me. Cultivated relationships with colleagues who understand what I’m going through, and we provide each other with emotional support and practical advice on how to handle difficult interactions with our leaders.”
Coping Strategies	Personal Development	“One coping strategy that has worked for me is focusing on personal development. Taken courses and attended workshops to enhance my skills and knowledge, which has not only boosted my confidence but also provided me with opportunities to explore other career paths within the organization.”
Coping Strategies	Emotional Intelligence	“Practicing self-care has been crucial for maintaining my well-being. Prioritize activities that bring me joy and relaxation outside of work, such as exercising, spending time with loved ones, and engaging in hobbies.”

Summary

The investigation into toxic leadership within Texas state agencies uncovered the deep and varied experiences of employees under such leadership. Through qualitative analysis, employees detailed their encounters with toxic behaviors, emphasizing the psychological trauma, erosion of trust, and the significant impact on their mental health and careers. These narratives, enriched by thematic categorization, reveal a commonality in experiences that underscore the adverse effects of toxic leadership on both individuals and organizational culture. The findings offer a comprehensive overview of how toxic leadership behaviors—characterized by abusive supervision, authoritarianism, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability—manifest within the workplace. Participants’ stories highlight not just the immediate effects of such leadership, but also the long-term implications, including the challenge of navigating professional relationships, the strategic employment of coping mechanisms, and the shift in perceptions and attitudes towards leadership.

Chapter 5 includes a more nuanced discussion of the study findings and how they relate to the current body of literature regarding toxic leadership and employee wellbeing. The chapter will also examine the potential for policy reforms and strategic interventions designed to counteract the negative influences of toxic leadership. Furthermore, we will delve into the opportunities for fostering a leadership ethos within Texas state agencies that champion support, inclusivity, and a positive organizational climate. By addressing

the root causes and widespread consequences identified in this research, Chapter 5 aims to propose constructive strategies for organizational change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study aimed to answer the question “How do Texas state employees describe their experiences of encountering toxic leadership within their agencies?” Participants in this study were current employees in various Texas state agencies that have experienced toxic leadership. I interviewed eight participants with face-to-face interviews conducted through Zoom. Most study participants described their leadership encounters as negative and explained how such encounters contributed to their decline in trust in leadership, low work engagement, psychological trauma, and desire to leave their workplace. This chapter provides an in-depth interpretation of the study findings, including limitations, recommendations for future studies, and implications for social change.

Interpretation of Findings

This section offers a detailed interpretation of the findings from the study on toxic leadership and its impact on employee perceptions, workplace dynamics, and organizational health. Initially the discussion focuses on the foundational perceptions of employees hold regarding their leaders and how these perceptions are impacted by toxic leadership behaviors, such as abusive supervision, self-promotion, unpredictability, authoritarianism, and narcissism. This initial discussion sets the stage for understanding the shifts in trust and perception among employees.

Following this, the study discusses the psychological behavioral responses of employees to toxic leadership. This includes the examination of psychological trauma and its manifestations in the workplace, such as anxiety, stress, depression, and physical

health impacts like elevated blood pressure. The subsequent sections discuss the broader organizational consequences of toxic leadership, detailing how these leadership behaviors contribute to a decline in employee engagement, productivity, and overall organizational performance.

Toxic Leadership Behaviors

Research illustrates that organizational employees view their leaders as role models and hold them in higher regard (Mahlangu, 2020). However, toxic leadership behaviors such as abusive supervision, self-promotion, unpredictability, authoritarianism, and narcissism violate employee trust in leaders (Mahlangu, 2020). The current study's findings indicate that experiences with toxic leadership behaviors altered participants' perceptions of their leaders, resulting in these participants' increased distrust. One participant noted that they do not believe that their leaders want what is best for them, or even know what is best for them. The findings are aligned with BTT in leadership and other previous studies on how toxic leadership erodes employee trust. Notably, Freyd and DePrince (2013) argued that interpersonal betrayal by leaders violates employees' psychological needs such as the need for autonomy, safety, and relatedness. The trauma caused by toxic leadership also makes it difficult for organizational changes to occur. For example, employees would be less willing to collaborate with new leaders. Because employees hold minimal power in the leader-employee relationship, toxic leadership traits are more likely to alter power balance and influence how employees perceive their leaders.

Psychological Trauma

Studies also found that toxic leadership can lead to employee psychological trauma. Freyd and DePrince (2013) argued that the heightened stress and relational disconnection may put employees at greater risk for developing mental health disorders like posttraumatic stress disorder or complex posttraumatic stress disorder, particularly when betrayal trauma persists over a prolonged period. Mahlangu (2020) and Wolor et al. (2022) also found that employee psychological response to toxic leadership behaviors can lead to negative attitudes toward their leaders and organizations' well-being, and work behaviors. Quantitative correlational studies also demonstrate a significant association between toxic leadership and employee burnout (Gobin & Freyd., 2017; Nevicka et al., 2018; Platt et al., 2017). The current study confirms such findings and adds to the literature on how toxic leadership affects employee psychological well-being. Research participants described experiencing constant anxiety, heightened stress, depression, and constant burnout that made it impossible for them to concentrate on their work roles. Participants also indicated that toxic leadership has other unforeseen physical health impacts including physical health effects of toxic leadership such as "elevated blood pressure" caused by "extreme anger" toward leaders.

Work Dynamics

While most employees suffer in silence and do not report their bosses as toxic, the current study found that employees react in various ways toward toxic leaders. One such reaction is through changes in work engagement. Study participants described their work dynamics after encountering toxic leadership behaviors including low work engagement,

which encompasses aspects such as low morale, decline in organizational pride and citizenship behavior, thoughts about turnover, and low productivity. Study results align with literature on the impact of leadership on employee performance. Mahlangu (2020), Indradevi (2016), and Saleem et al. (2022) found that toxic leadership behaviors lead to low employee satisfaction, higher turnover rates, low employee morale and engagement, and reduced productivity.

Toxic leadership does not only affect employees but the broader organization. Employee response to toxic leadership leads to lower productivity, which in turn leads to poor organizational outcomes. The current study found that most employees blame toxic leadership for the agency's failure to complete projects and meet deadlines. The results conform with Mahlangu's (2020) findings that toxic leadership leads to lower organizational performance, damage organizational reputation, and a decline in service quality and customer retention. The impact of toxic leadership on service quality is often more pronounced in public organizations, where a work backlog lead hinders an agency's ability to deliver public services. For example, the backlog of cases in the judiciary system hinders justice and adversely affects public members (Zahlquist et al., 2023). Furthermore, toxic leadership leads to the normalization of toxic workplace culture, which negatively affects organizational climate and hinders organizational ability to retain and attract new talents. In essence, toxic leadership does not only erode employee trust in their leaders but also diminishes employee trust in each other, creating a hostile climate that makes work impossible.

While the current study findings are not applicable in a wider context, the findings

also reveal intricate details about leadership in public organizations. Previous studies (see Evans et al., 2013; Zahlquist et al., 2023) characterize organizational climate in public organizations as hostile. Leadership in these organizations is characterized by authoritarianism and a constant power struggle that renders employees voiceless. This generally explains why most public employees lack the right to strike and demand for better organizational climate (Zahlquist et al., 2023). The findings of this study confirm such a pattern through a high prevalence of toxic leadership behaviors. All eight participants described having experienced more than 4 toxic leadership behaviors, with an organizational culture that normalizes such behaviors.

Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges, the current study findings indicate that employees use various coping strategies to deal with toxic leadership and the resulting psychological trauma. Such strategies include seeking professional help services such as counseling, relying on family and friends for emotional support and tips on how to survive toxic bosses, improving skills to transfer to other departments or look for better career opportunities, learning how to control emotions, and taking control of how you react to situations and accepting that toxic bosses exist everywhere and assimilating to the toxic workplace culture. These findings conform with previous research findings on employee coping strategies. For example, Bamberger and Bacharach (2006); and Bhandarkar and Rai (2019) found that employees use various strategies to cope with toxic work environments, including therapy. However, contrary to the current findings, Bamberger and Bacharach (2006) indicated that most employees also respond with maladaptive

behaviors such as drug and substance abuse as a coping strategy. Such coping strategies are also commonly cited in literature as the initial individual response to stressful situations (Sinha, 2008). Nonetheless, the current study only explored positive coping strategies, which could explain the variation.

Limitations of the Study

While the insights from this study are valuable, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations. The primary constraint is the small sample size; although Saunders et al. (2018) suggests that data saturation in qualitative research can often be achieved with around nine participants, this study includes only eight. Additionally, the study experienced a high response rate to the screening survey and a low response rate to actual interviews. As a result, the experiences of these eight participants might not fully represent the diverse ways employees across Texas state organization handle toxic leadership.

Secondly, the study's focus on Texas state agencies provides a specific organizational context that may only partially be representative of or transferable to other sectors or geographical regions. This focus, while critical for addressing the research questions, limits the broader applicability of the findings to different organizational environments. Lower generalizability indicates that study results cannot be replicated or applicable in different contexts, such as in private organizations or different states.

Thirdly, the study suffers from self-selection bias. Self-selection bias occurs when study participants choose to join a group on their own (Kaźmierczak et al., 2023). The study relied on self-reported experiences of toxic leadership, potentially attracting

participants with more extreme or negative experiences. This could lead to an overrepresentation of the most severe cases and potentially inflate the perceived impact of toxic leadership on coping strategies. While the researcher strives to minimize such bias by using open-ended questions and encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences, study participants could likely have other motives for participating in the study. One notable scenario is where participants described their toxic leadership experiences to have contributed to depression, although depression is a diagnosable mental health condition and none of the participants reported having been diagnosed with depressive disorder. Such limitation affects the credibility of the study findings.

Fourthly, the current study relies on self-reported data that is difficult to validate. It is plausible that study respondents might have offered biased responses given the fact that they were aware of the study goals and interview questions before the study. Although the study was confidential, study participants might still have made conscious efforts to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. The existence of social desirability can be inferred from the absence of major discrepant cases from the research data. Social desirability often leads to self-enhancement of the respondent's image, which in this research could infer the participants playing victims and disregarding their own behaviors that could have contributed to the negative encounters. This lends itself to the participants answering the questions in a way that they think will make them look like an enhanced version of themselves.

Lastly, the study has lower dependability and confirmability due to researcher bias and reliance on a sole researcher. As a past employee of Texas state agencies, the

researcher might have possessed unconscious biases that could influence data collection or analysis. Furthermore, qualitative studies are plagued by a higher researcher bias since researcher beliefs, experiences and stereotypes largely influence how they interpret participant experiences. While the researcher mitigated such bias through objectivity, such as member checking (allowing participants to review and confirm the findings) and debriefing after data collection, it is difficult to eliminate bias without an independent reviewer. This could limit confirmability, as there's no independent verification of findings. However, this limitation has been addressed through increased transparency in study design and methodology, which makes it easier for study replication.

Recommendations

Research on toxic leadership is broad, which presents future researchers with limitless opportunities to explore the topic. Future researchers can conduct quantitative longitudinal studies to examine how toxic leadership affects employee well-being, organizational culture, and organizational performance. Such studies must include valid measures for mental and physical health, and other adverse outcomes such as high turnover and low work engagement. Therefore, while this study has identified associations between toxic leadership behaviors and physical health issues, such as high blood pressure, further research is needed to explore these relationships in a causal framework. Employing a mixed-methods approach can also provide a more accurate understanding of how toxic leadership affects employee well-being.

Secondly, future studies could replicate this study using different demographics and cultures to further explore how cultural changes influence employee perception of

toxic leadership. Conducting the study in other contexts can also help examine whether current study findings are held in other regions or sections. Expanding the scope of the investigation to include private sector organizations, non-profit entities, and public agencies in other states or countries could provide valuable insights into the universality of toxic leadership impacts. Such research could reveal whether the dynamics and effects of toxic leadership observed in this study are unique to Texas state agencies' specific organizational and geographic context or represent a broader phenomenon.

Thirdly, future research can focus more on the impact of toxic leadership on minority groups such as women, racial and sexual minorities, and disabled individuals in both public and private institutions. The current study emphasizes the negative impact of toxic leadership on employee well-being but fails to explore the specific impact on minority groups who might face additional challenges under toxic leaders. Exploring such impact on vulnerable communities can help reveal how toxic leadership intersects with existing discrimination and marginalization within organizations. Such studies can also shed more light on how different groups perceive and are affected by toxic leadership. This understanding can inform targeted initiatives and support mechanisms to ensure organizational inclusion and equality.

Lastly, while the current study identified a range of coping mechanisms used by employees, it does not assess the relative effectiveness of different strategies. Employees are the ones who are directly affected by toxic leaders. In most instances, employees cannot leave their employment positions due to toxic leaders, under the assumption that such bosses exist everywhere. Exploring more on employee coping strategies can

illuminate how people cope with toxic workplaces, maintain their mental health, and contribute to organizational efficiency despite poor leadership. Findings from such studies can have significant applicability at the individual and organizational levels and can inform the provision of mental health resources and other required support to employees.

Implications

Individual Level

The implications of this research for positive social change are vast and multifaceted, promising advancements at individual, organizational, and societal levels. The study's findings on various coping strategies can also empower employees to navigate toxic work environments more effectively. By understanding how others manage stress, anxiety, and disengagement, employees can develop their own resilience and maintain well-being. This can lead to increased confidence, improved job satisfaction, and a stronger sense of self-worth. The study insights can also help clinicians and industrial-organizational psychologists understand the workplace stressors affecting their clients. Clinicians can play a vital role in providing support to employees dealing with psychological trauma that results from toxic leadership experiences.

Organizational Level

Current study findings provide more insights into how toxic leadership affects both employee and organizational outcomes. One implication of the study is the development of employee wellness programs in organizations. The study emphasizes the psychological toll of toxic leadership, including stress, burnout, and decreased

motivation. Organizations can help employees cope with these challenges by implementing comprehensive wellness programs that include stress management workshops, access to mental health resources, and opportunities for work-life balance. Investing in employee well-being fosters a more resilient workforce and reduces the risk of negative consequences associated with toxic leadership. Such investment can also lead to lower turnover rates, increase employee job morale, and improve performance. Another implication is the importance of implementing leadership training programs. Organizations should invest in leadership training programs that emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical behavior, and effective communication. These programs can equip leaders with the skills to build trust, motivate teams, and create a more positive work environment. Leadership training can also help foster a positive organizational culture. Furthermore, study findings indicate that organizations must conduct regular assessments of their culture and identify potential issues related to leadership behaviors. Based on these assessments, organizations can implement strategies to promote a culture of respect, collaboration, and transparency. This cultural shift can attract and retain top talent and foster a more successful and sustainable organization.

Lastly, study findings can inform organizations to implement whistleblower policies and enhance transparency that would allow employees to report toxic leadership behaviors. The study suggests that some employees might be hesitant to leave their organizations despite experiencing toxic leadership. Employees also suffer in silence because of the existing hierarchy that prevents them from reporting to their bosses discreetly. Organizations can address this by strengthening whistleblower policies that

allow employees to report inappropriate behavior confidentially and without fear of retaliation. Clear and accessible reporting mechanisms can empower employees to speak up and encourage a culture of accountability for leadership behaviors.

Societal/Policy Level

Policy Discourse: The study's findings can contribute to broader discussions about workplace culture and employee well-being. By documenting the negative impacts of toxic leadership, the research can encourage policymakers to consider potential interventions at the legislative level. For example, strengthening whistleblower protection policies can empower employees to speak up against unethical leadership practices. Such policies can particularly be useful in enhancing leadership ethos and transparency in public organizations.

Methodological and Empirical Implications

Methodologically, this study's application of qualitative analysis underscores the depth and breadth of understanding that can be achieved through detailed narrative explorations of toxic leadership's impact. Insights from the study can inform future development of research instruments, such as surveys, to measure the prevalence and impact of toxic leadership on a larger scale. Theoretically, it validates and extends the relevance of betrayal trauma theory to the intricacies of organizational life, offering a robust framework for analyzing the psychological ramifications of toxic leadership. Empirically, the research contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the significant mental and physical health consequences of toxic leadership, paving the way for further studies in the domain.

Practice Recommendations

Organizations can utilize the study findings to implement leadership training programs that focus on emotional intelligence and empathy. Such initiatives are essential for breeding a new generation of leader's adept at handling complex interpersonal dynamics and fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace culture. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of employee well-being. Organizations can implement comprehensive wellness programs offering stress management workshops, access to mental health resources, and support for work-life balance. Lastly, industrial psychologists and organizational behavior experts can infer from the study findings to inform interventions that promote a safe and cooperative culture and also offer counseling and guidance to employees to minimize psychological trauma.

Conclusion

This study has found that toxic leadership with Texas state agencies has profound repercussions on employees and organizations. Drawing from rich qualitative insights, the study findings are a wake-up call for public and private organizations to eliminate abusive leadership practices. Current study findings align with previous literature findings that indicate a higher prevalence of toxic leadership behaviors and culture in public organizations, which is so perverse and normalized to an extent that most employees fail to realize the implications. It is also apparent that the normalization of toxic leadership behaviors makes leaders blind to the psychological trauma caused by their actions.

This study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address toxic

leadership. While individual coping mechanisms can offer temporary relief, lasting change requires a comprehensive transformation of organizational culture. This transformation fosters an environment that champions empathic and positive leadership while prioritizing the development of a supportive and resilient employee community. The study also proposes avenues for future research that can help shed more light on the topic. These avenues include investigating the causal links between toxic leadership and employee well-being and evaluating the effectiveness of intervention strategies in diverse organizational settings through mixed-methods research, including the voices of minority groups and exploring employee coping strategies.

The study author believes that long-lasting solutions can only be found if employees are provided avenues to voice their concerns and report to their leaders. Most leaders are drunk in power and oblivious to the consequences of their actions on employees and organizational culture. Furthermore, toxic organizational cultures persist after a leadership change. Empowering employees to recognize and report toxic leadership traits can help leaders learn from their mistakes and improve their leadership styles. While it is true that leaders cannot please everyone and toxic leadership traits are subjective, having clear organizational policies can help develop a healthier work environment. Therefore, this study serves as a call to action for organizations to prioritize employee well-being and build resilience against the detrimental effects of toxic leadership.

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Appendix A: Research Screening Protocol

Purpose: To select participants from Texas state agencies who have experienced toxic leadership.

Introduction: The study investigates toxic leadership, characterized by harmful behaviors like abuse, authoritarianism, and narcissism, within organizational settings. It aims to understand how these behaviors impact employees and the work environment. By exploring employee experiences, the study seeks to uncover the effects of toxic leadership and inform strategies for healthier workplace cultures.

Confidentiality Clause: Participant confidentiality and identity protection are paramount in this study. All personal information and responses will be kept confidential, and identities will be anonymized to ensure privacy. Any data shared in the findings will be presented in a manner that prevents participant identification.

Participant Criteria:

Agency Experience: At least one year at a Texas state agency.

Toxic Leadership Exposure: Worked under leadership exhibiting specific toxic behaviors as defined by Schmidt and Hanges Scale (2008).

Impact Observation: Perceived effects of toxic leadership on employee well-being.

Screening Questions:

Screening Questions:

I. Agency Experience:

“Can you confirm your tenure at a Texas state agency, ensuring it is at least one year?”

II. Toxic Leadership Exposure:

“Have you experienced leadership that demonstrated any of the following behaviors?”

- a) Abusive Supervision: Hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical abuse. This includes actions like public criticism, humiliation, rudeness, or unfair treatment. Example: A leader who publicly scolds an employee for minor errors.
- b) Authoritarianism: A leadership style characterized by demanding absolute obedience and exercising control with strict and often oppressive measures. It involves little to no input from team members. Example: A leader who makes all

decisions unilaterally, without considering team suggestions or feedback.

- c) Narcissism: Self-centered and arrogant behavior, where leaders are preoccupied with their interests and achievements. They may require excessive admiration and show a lack of empathy for others. Example: A leader consistently takes credit for the team's achievements while ignoring others' contributions.
- d) Self-Promotion: Behaviors where the leader consistently advances their image or interests, often at the expense of others. This includes exaggerating personal accomplishments and downplaying team members' roles. Example: A leader who uses team successes for personal gain while failing to recognize the team's efforts.
- e) Unpredictability: Inconsistent or erratic behavior that creates uncertainty or instability in the workplace. This can manifest as sudden changes in decisions, mood swings, or unpredictable reactions. Example: A leader who praises employees one day and unreasonably criticizes them for the same behavior the next.

III. Affirmation of Authenticity:

"I confirm that the leadership behaviors I select truly reflect my experiences. My responses are factual and represent actual events, free from personal bias against any leadership conduct that does not align with the descriptions provided."

IV. Impact on Well-being:

"Would you state from your perspective that the lived experience with this type of leadership, has impacted your well-being/mental health?"

V. Closing:

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with us. Your input is invaluable to this study. If you are selected to participate further, we will contact you shortly with detailed information about the next steps, including scheduling an in-depth interview at a convenient time. In these interviews, we will delve deeper into your experiences with toxic leadership. Please be assured that your confidentiality and privacy will remain strictly protected throughout this process. We appreciate your willingness to contribute to this vital research.

Appendix B: Research Interview Protocol

Purpose of the Study:

To investigate employees' experiences who have encountered toxic leadership in Texas state agencies.

- Researcher & Participant Introduction:
- Brief introduction of the study and its objectives.
- Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Consent for participation and recording of the interview.
- Notice Clause: As a previous Texas state employee, I am familiar with the setting of our discussion. To maintain objectivity, the interview questions are standardized. I encourage you to share openly and in detail, within your comfort level, to enrich our study with your valuable perspective.

Interview Questions

Background Information:

- Please describe your role and tenure in the Texas state agency.
- Which state agency were you and/or are you employed by?
- Were you in a leadership position?

Experience with Leadership

- Can you describe your experience(s) with leadership?
- Could you provide examples of when and where you experienced these leadership behaviors?
- At what point during your tenure did you first observe these behaviors you described before?
- How would you describe your feelings about the role and the work environment before your experience(s)?
- Did this was /these experience(s) change your feelings about the work environment?
- Reflecting on your described experiences, have there been any significant changes in your feelings towards leadership and authority figures?

- How would you describe these experiences' influence on any work-related decisions?
- How would you describe the influence of these experiences on different aspects of your life?
- Have you faced any societal challenges or difficulties due to these experiences?
- What strategies have you used to deal with the experience(s) you have described?
- How are your behaviors at work now after your experience (s)?
- What kind of support or resources did you find the most helpful?

Final Thoughts and Suggestions:

- What suggestions are you for improving your described experiences for others and the agency?
- Was there anything else about your experiences you would like to share?

Closing Remarks:

- Thank the participants for their time and valuable insights.
- Inform them about the next steps and how they can access the study results.
 - Next steps are data analysis
 - Review of transcripts and conclusion with them before publishing, to ensure accuracy and validity.
- Offer resources for mental health in their local area based on 211, as resource in Texas for affordable or free resources.

Appendix C: Observation Sheet

Researcher's Name: Monika Diaz
 Date of Observation: [Date]
 Location: [Location or Setting of the Observation]
 Observation Session Numbers: [Session Numbers]

Participant Information

Participant ID:
 Brief Background:

Observations on Specific Interview Questions

Background Information:

Can you describe your role and tenure in the Texas state agency?

Observations:
 Participant's Response:

How would you describe the overall work environment in your agency?

Observations:
 Participant's Response:

Were you in a leadership position?

Observations:
 Participant's Response:

Experience with Leadership

Can you describe your experience(s) with leadership?

Observations:
 Participant's Response:

Can you provide examples of when and where you experienced these leadership behaviors?

Observations:
 Participant's Response:

At what point during your tenure did you first observe these behaviors you described before?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

How would you describe your feelings about the role and the work environment before your experience(s)?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

Did this was /these experience(s) change your feelings about the work environment?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

Reflecting on your described experiences, have there been any significant changes in your feelings towards leadership and authority figures?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

How would you describe these experiences' influence on any work-related decisions?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

How would you describe the influence of these experiences on different aspects of your life?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

Have you faced any societal challenges or difficulties due to these experiences?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

What strategies have you used to deal with the experience(s) you have described?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

How are your behaviors at work now after your experience (s)?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

What kind of support or resources did you find the most helpful?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

Final Thoughts and Suggestions:

What suggestions are you for improving your described experiences for others and the agency?

Observations:

Participant's Response:

Was there anything else about your experiences you would like to share?

Observations:

Participant's Response: