

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PERSONNEL ADVERSELY IMPACTED BY TOXIC
LEADERSHIP: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This topic is important to study because the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and negative environments have severe adverse implications for personnel, such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall well-being. In order to further understand the phenomenon, the following research questions guided the study: (a) What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership? (b) How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment? (c) What was each person's response to the change? (d) What was each person's response to the toxic environment? The theory guiding this study was Weber's leadership theory, which is where leaders can both positively and negatively impact subordinates. Social constructivism will be used to understand the participants' lived experiences. The snowball sampling technique was used and resulted in 1,129 people completing the online survey and 29 people completing a semi-structured interview and submitting written statements of who they were before and after the lived experience. Pattern, theme, and content analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The research revealed that leadership, or what was defined as toxic leadership, was identified and prevalent in organizations by almost every single respondent. The narcissistic, harmful, and bullying behavior was normally followed by no response at all or support of the toxic manager by the organization. This resulted in further targeting by the toxic managers or followers and adversely impacted personnel's short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health.

Keywords: lived experience, leadership, toxic, response, organization

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral dissertation to:

Those who have been adversely impacted by toxic leaders, environments, climates, or organizational cultures.

Everyone who has taken the time to read this dissertation. I hope that you will take something away from this dissertation that can help subdue or eliminate toxicity in an organization, or help someone who is adversely impacted by toxic leaders and organizations.

The love of my life and soulmate, Leilani, who has supported me in all of my crazy endeavors, from starting a national water polo program in Afghanistan to this doctoral program; for holding everything down while I was working this program for the last six years; raising our children to be quality individuals who have already become contributing members of society and in the community since such young ages; and for all of the times I was gone, both mentally and physically during my multiple deployments and assignments.

My daughter, Isabella, who is on her way to start her master's degree as I complete this dissertation. You are going to take on the world with confidence and compassion and I know you will always ensure that those within your sphere of influence can participate and be involved. Your leadership and goodwill are infectious as you have successfully demonstrated since an early age.

My son, Westy, who is one of the most charismatic and sensitive leaders that I know. You have always had an interest in helping others and imparting information to anyone who may need it. I do not know if you realize how much you positively impact others, but it is a privilege to watch from my viewpoint.

Missy, the leader of the pack, who was always there to encourage all of us during the good and bad times. You always made us smile, feel protected and safe, and nursed us all back to health.

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Next, I would like to acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Yocum. You provided me the support that I truly needed during this process. You never judged me or showed frustration for my delays through this research and writing process. I would also like to acknowledge my committee member, Dr. Taylor. You were quick to agree to be on my committee and always extremely responsive to provide extremely helpful feedback.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the toxic managers, leaders, and those who contribute to adverse organizational environments and cultures throughout the world. Although these actions are often damaging and provide an insurmountable challenge, they also provide so many opportunities for research studies on several varied topics that are a result of toxic leadership.

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List of Abbreviations

Before the Common Era (BCE)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Human Resources (HR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Sub Question (SQ)

United States (US)

United States of America (USA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to understand the lived experience of personnel who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Toxic leadership is generally defined as the deliberate sabotaging, unethical, immoral, illegal, unethical, criminal, manipulative, and bullying behavior that a person with a position of influence can emotionally, mentally, and physically impact personnel within their surroundings (Burns, 2017; Pathak, 2017). Deliberate sabotaging, unethical, immoral, illegal, unethical, criminal, manipulative, and bullying behavior that a person with a position of influence can emotionally, mentally, and physically impact personnel within their surroundings (Burns, 2017; Pathak, 2017)With leadership and organizational culture coming to the forefront by academic and business journals and mainstream publications, one of the glaring issues is toxic leaders. While focus has turned to toxic leadership, there has been no focus on what the essence or lived experiences of individuals in organizations are. The purpose of chapter one is to provide a framework of the phenomenology, which will focus on the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This chapter will provide a historical, social, and theoretical overview, a foundation of the problem, how toxic leadership adversely impacts personnel of an organization, a synopsis of literature in which the phenomenological research is founded, identify the importance of the qualitative research, and will introduce the research. After laying the foundation, the problem and purpose statements will be stated, why the study is significant, research, research questions, definitions, and a summary of the chapter.

Background

The environment and culture of any organization is adversely impacted when toxic

leadership takes hold, reducing the abilities and morale of the organization and its personnel (G. E. Reed, 2015). This topic was important to study because the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders (V. Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2016) and a negative culture and environment have severe adverse implications for personnel within an organization such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing.

Historical

The concept of leadership has been around since the beginning of time. Roman and Greek literature, dating back to 900 BCE were full of leadership principles (Graf, 1996), while the writing of leadership has been estimated to go back as far as 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, which is also the same time period that writing began to appear in civilization (Rebore, 2014). There is always a leader or multiple leaders of a group of any size, whether they are self-appointed, placed by another leader, or consensus by the group.

The history of leadership is defined into three different periods: Classical, with philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Marcus Aurelius; modern; and contemporary (Flynn, 2008; Kulshreshtha, 2015; Montgomerie, 2010; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Pučėtaitė, Novelskaitė, & Markūnaitė, 2015; B. N. Reed, Klutts, & Mattingly Ii, 2019). The first known use of the word “leadership” was in 1765, with its current definition being “Influences, motivates, enables, or empowers other people, often in the achievement of a specific goal” (B. N. Reed et al., 2019). Many theorists believe that the true meaning of leadership can only be derived by each individual’s personal experiences (Komives & Dugan, 2010). Perspectives on leadership and leadership theories in different periods of time have changed with time, location, situation, and outcomes. For example, throughout history, women in leadership roles are largely absent

due to leadership perspectives of the time periods (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). There were most likely many women, who were leaders in local areas or regions but their stories and theories are lost to time.

In the classical and modern periods, leadership was focused on producing results. An individual or group were considered great leaders if they won battles, overthrew governments, annexed countries or regions, or were extremely successful in their missions. A perfect example is in 480 B.C., where Xerxes I led an army of hundreds of thousands into battle against approximately 7,000 Greeks, and his army easily defeated the 300 Greek soldiers that did not flee, the Spartans (Montgomerie, 2010). Xerxes I, known as the king of kings, king of lands, and king of men, was considered one of the most prominent and effective leaders of his time because of his ability to win wars. However, this ability to win came at the convenience of an overwhelming and superior force that he led and not because of tactics or his ability to lead the force. If Xerxes I had matched the numbers of the Greek army that stayed to fight, led by Leonidas, would Xerxes I have been remembered as the leader that history immortalized him as, or would he have just been a footnote in history as Leonidas and the Spartans were?

Contemporary leadership has been built by philosophers and theorists learning from previous leadership periods and understanding that there is more to leadership than previously considered. Contemporary leadership theories have been developing for the last 40 years, where it began with theorists and philosophers such as Burns (1978), Bass (1985; 1990; 1996; 1997; 2006), Conger (1987; 1989; 1998), House (1977), and even Weber (1947), who wrote about contemporary leadership theories before anyone else (Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebores, 2014; Yukl, 1999). All of these theorists stated that their generational influences and traditions influenced their leadership theories (Komives & Dugan, 2010). While there are numerous

contemporary leadership theories, the key theories include: Transformational, charismatic, transactional, servant, relational, collaborative, shared, social change model, complexity, and authentic leadership (Covelli & Mason, 2017; Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2014; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Wellman, 2017; Yukl, 1999). Using the previous example, both Xerxes I and Leonidas, or maybe just Leonidas, could have been considered great leaders if judged by any of the key contemporary leadership theories.

Over the centuries, leadership has been continuously defined and refined, however, leadership principles never change. Whether it was stated by ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, William Shakespeare, the untold amount of people who have written or spoken about leadership, practitioners, or researchers, everyone agrees that leadership is abundant, necessary at every level, include many facets and application, and have critical aspects (Covelli & Mason, 2017). Ethics, one of the many critical aspects, is extremely important to leaders as it is “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Leadership principles and ethics are the foundation for any quality leader (Burns, 2017; Effelsberg et al., 2014; Flynn, 2008; Hinojosa, Davis McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014; Kulshreshtha, 2015; Kuoppala, Lamminpää, Liira, & Vainio, 2008; Rhodes & Badham, 2018; Yukl, 1999). If leaders do not possess these requirements, these individuals are managers, administrators, or executives at best, and not true leaders.

Unethical behaviors of managers and lack of leadership are two of the major reasons for toxicity in an organization (Covelli & Mason, 2017). The mortgage debt and stock market crisis in 2008 are two examples of extreme greed at the highest levels of leadership that ultimately led to financial destitution for millions of people. The infamous Ponzi scheme, or Wells Fargo’s creation of over four million fake consumer accounts, provide examples where those that

suffered the consequences were not decision makers, and in fact trusted these leaders to protect their assets.

Financial greed is not the only driving force behind destructive decisions leaders make. Power and ego can also be a catalyst for toxic leadership (Armitage, 2015; Boddy, Miles, Sanyal, & Hartog, 2015; Burns, 2017), as currently seen in the countless sexual assault accusations in the entertainment industry. An absence of checks and balances (Seago, 2016) led elected political officials, such as congressmen and senators, to create and actively participate in a breeding ground of sexual harassment and assault against subordinate employees. This type of toxicity often thrives in an open environment because people are afraid to speak up.

In the sports industry, it is not uncommon to hear stories of doping and match fixing scandals. Respected organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association and the International Olympic Committee have ongoing fiscal irregularities or fail to enact and enforce policies that protect athletes. USA Gymnastics and USA Swimming have fostered a culture of toxic leadership and coaching that led to the gross abuse of authority against both adult and youth athletes. High ranking military officials can create toxic environments that do not align with officer ethos, yet continue to spread like cancer, because their authority goes unchallenged and unquestioned (Boddy, 2017). The financial exploitations by the King of Zimbabwe are a good example a leader in the highest seat of power that blatantly leads without any regard for those in his care. We continue to see shocking examples of toxicity, horrific leadership practices, lack of leadership, and scandals within the last 15 years, without also seeing an equal measure of accountability. These examples highlight only some of the high levels of organizations that are extremely toxic and the destructive leaders within them (Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012).

However, toxic leadership is not a recent phenomenon, it is just more apparent due to radio, television, and the internet (Covelli & Mason, 2017). Over the last 25 years, research and awareness of toxic leadership, bad leaders, harmful organizations, and overall literature on leadership have been increased (Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, & Lunsford, 2018). Understanding what constitutes poor, bad, toxic, and destructive leadership and why individuals and organizations behave this way has been the primary focus of the recent research.

Toxic leadership does not present in just one form. Some of the behavioral characteristics that personnel must endure from toxic managers are: Lack of integrity, forcing people to endure hardships, threatening job security or safety, emotional and potentially physical volatility, displaying anger, showing favoritism, ostracizing personnel, excluding individuals for professional or social functions, degrading, mocking, ridiculing, and demeaning behavior (Pelletier, 2012). All of this toxicity must have an impact on personnel that have interaction with the abusive leader.

Social

Being part of any organization requires the individual to become part of the collective network of personnel (Cherman & Rocha-Pinto, 2016). This assimilation is one of the most important aspects of joining an organization, sometimes even more critical than what the individual actually brings to the table. Being part of the personnel network can prepare an individual to understand the culture, environment, processes, procedures, and how certain personnel operate within the organization, thus preparing them for whatever each member may encounter. However, there is no amount of preparation for a toxic environment, toxic leader, or social challenge in any organization.

The dynamics of organizations are extremely fragile. Positive influence can considerably

move the organization in the correct direction while negative influence has the adverse effect. In any state that the organization is in, it will always impact the personnel within the organization and those within its influence. Often, when there is a situation of poor, toxic, or destructive leadership, the media will highlight the leaders and their poor leadership skills and not the overarching issues such as how society currently contributes to the thought process and judgment of those who wrong others (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). If society does not firmly address these negative players, actors, and influencers, then destructive leaders will still continue to be tolerated or even praised in the workplace as it is socially accepted.

Theoretical

The theory guiding this study was Weber's leadership theory. Max Weber is credited with creating the theory where leaders can positively and negatively impact subordinate satisfaction, performance, motivation, contribution, and worth (Ahmad, Fazal-E-Hasan, & Kaleem, 2018; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebores, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Weber, 1922; Yukl, 1999). An abundant amount of research studies have been conducted about toxic leadership, negative leaders, lack of leadership, how toxic leaders impact organizations and its long-term impact (Ozer, Ugurluoglu, Kahraman, & Avci, 2017; Powers, Judge, & Makela, 2016), identifying the common coping strategies of followers of a destructive leader (V. Webster et al., 2016), but there was little to no adequate research about those who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

Leadership theory in this case focuses on how leaders socially influence individuals, groups, environment, culture, and is one of the most important human phenomena (Wellman, 2017). Authentic leadership theory focuses on this social influence, further focusing on moral, ethical, charismatic, and even spiritual leadership, while simultaneously being self-aware

(Covelli & Mason, 2017). This self-awareness is not only what each leader's capabilities and limitations are, but it also contains their emotions, values, and history (Yukl, 1999). This theory is an instrumental factor in how toxic leaders can and will adversely impact personnel within their sphere of influence. Another important leadership theory that was researched was great man theory where some people are born with attributes that define, or set themselves apart from others, which results in those people assuming positions of power and authority (Borgatta, Bales, & Couch, 1954; Mouton, 2019). The unfortunate combination of being born with inherent leadership capabilities, conceitedness, and incognizance, results in a not so great man and their belief in themselves that they are a hero and savior leads to the downfall of organizations, teams, and governments (Mouton, 2019). Transformational leadership theory is where leaders and followers support and help each other, for the betterment of the team to realize success (Fourie & Höhne, 2019; Kwan, 2020). Raising each member of the team's morale, belief in the team and mission, and self-confidence, the team will align their focus and reach success (Fourie & Höhne, 2019). Researching each of these leadership theories provided greater insight for those leaders of organizations and those who may experience a toxic, destructive, or hostile environment or organizational culture and an understanding of the thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and actions by those who are adversely impacted by this environment. This research will help keep personnel safe against detrimental conduct of toxic leaders by understanding the phenomenon through the lived experience.

Situation to Self

I have encountered many outstanding leaders and dynamic organizations in my life as well as toxic leaders, environments, and organizational cultures on several occasions. Through some of these toxic situations, I personally was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. While

experiencing the phenomenon firsthand, it was only through a singular lens. However, the power of voice is to come from multiple people experiencing the same phenomenon in one or many different places. Additional information through different lenses provided an opportunity (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016) for research, analysis, and reporting the phenomenon in detail and will also arm individuals who read the dissertation to enable them to understand the environment, culture, and ultimately the effects. Just like I would only be able to explain what my lived experience was, which is ontological, the research of the participants was philosophical hermeneutics (Schwandt, 2015). During the research study, I used social constructivism to understand the participants' lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015; van Manen, 2016) that guided the study. Social constructivism showed that no matter how much one may have read or learned about a particular topic or phenomenon, that unless they do not encounter or are impacted the phenomenon, they will never understand it (Knapp, 2019). This is where social constructivism, hermeneutic phenomenology, and authentic leadership theory converge: If an individual has not encountered a particular phenomenon themselves, how could they possibly remotely understand, research, and produce results in a research study?

My encounters with toxic environments and how they adversely impacted me and others made me want to understand many of the thoughts, feelings, conceptions, and perceptions that I had experienced. I ultimately had to ask some questions to better understand the phenomenon and my response to it:

- Based on each individual's background, what was their perception of and reaction to the phenomenon?
- What could have been done differently at the onset or during the phenomenon to change the scenario or perception?

- What were they thinking and experiencing during the phenomenon?
- What were their perceptions of any changes of relationship dynamics in their professional lives?

While there are so many situations to second guess every thought, action, and decision during a phenomenon like this, seeking understanding of the experience itself is extremely important.

The ontological assumption, which is the study of being and what the structure of the reality is (Ahmed, 2008), was the primary focus of this research study as this phenomenon is seen through too many lenses throughout the world. However, I could not ignore the axiological philosophical assumption, which is where researchers make their own values and biases known in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as I knew the essence of my experience during the phenomenon. Due to the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, my own experience may have reflected in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While not intentional, I could not ignore the probability that I could have interpreted a description of an experience that a participant shared with my own lens. This same bias also did assist me in understanding the participants' experiences (Schwandt, 2015) which I would truly not have understood if the same phenomenon did not happen to me. Essentially, it would have been like an insect trying to understand the human language. By experiencing and not experiencing the phenomenon during multiple time periods and in different scenarios in my life, I developed an epistemological assumption that I gained imperative phenomenological knowledge through different lenses.

In order to gain a deep, rich, and thick understanding of the lived experience during the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016), I identified the rhetorical assumptions that I was not on a quest to seek the truth (Schwandt, 2015) and not problem solve (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015; van Manen, 2016), I was only searching for the essence of the

phenomenon. While many would feel that interpretive framework used was transformative, the research was not to provide answers, develop an agenda, address injustices, question the methods used by toxic individuals, or highlight any organizations' issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I began my doctoral journey while I was being adversely impacted by an extremely toxic environment. Only having my perception of the facts, circumstances, and outcomes of the many situations I dealt with, I truly wondered if I was the only one who has remotely experienced the phenomenon in the way I did. However, I did not know which specific facet I wanted to address until the end of the second year of my doctoral studies. When I began looking into the lived experience of those impacted by toxic environments, I found that while I was definitely not alone in this world when it came to my experiences, there was not remotely enough information and there was an opportunity to voice the lived experience like no one before. This was my motivation for conducting this research study.

Problem Statement

The context of this research study was extremely important because of the experiences that personnel live through. Harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and a negative environment have severely adverse implications for personnel within an organization such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing (Burns, 2017; Dehring, von Treuer, & Redley, 2018; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016). While there is a plethora of information about toxic leaders and possible impacts, there is scarce research on the actual lived experience of those personnel adversely impacted during this phenomenon. The problem is that toxic leadership is contagious and creates a negative environment and an entropic organization, which will deteriorate in a rapid manner (Barsky, 2014; Burns, 2017; MacLennan, 2017; Morgan, 2006; Ozer et al., 2017; Thoroughgood

et al., 2018). The toxic environment enables those who are leading to humiliate, find faults, treat poorly, and reduces value of the subordinates (Ozer et al., 2017). Additionally, the environment prevents personnel within the organization from whistle-blowing or attempting to change the environment (Powers et al., 2016). When impacted personnel or bystanders attempt to involve senior leaders or outside organizations to see the horrid injustices, it will most likely be met with negative reciprocity and will inflict harm on the whistle-blower and those adversely impacted (Burns, 2017). This issue impacts an unknown sector of the global population, but it is likely that personnel have experienced or witnessed it firsthand. This qualitative, phenomenological, and hermeneutical research study focused on the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

The environment and culture of any organization is adversely impacted when toxic leadership takes hold, reducing the abilities and morale of the organization and its personnel. The leadership and actions of senior personnel creating a toxic environment, or the perception of a destructive environment, means that there is no check and balances system in place and will just solidify centralized and corrupt control (Powers et al., 2016). This environment alienates, isolates, shuts down the flow of communication, and removes any power that personnel within an organization have. Personnel within this type of an organization will ultimately participate in fear, create strategies to avoid toxic leaders at all costs, keep opinions and ideas to themselves, evade conflict, and brace themselves for job termination (Powers et al., 2016).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to understand the lived experience of personnel who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership. As previously identified, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived

experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. There was little or no research that gave a voice to personnel who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This research described the essence of the phenomenon and gave voice to those who were adversely impacted by toxic and destructive leadership. At this stage in the research, toxic leaders were defined as “self-serving, aimed at obtaining personal rather than organizational goals, do not care about the organization or the people within, and use their positional power and their authority to intimidate coerce and deceive people who work for them” (Pathak, 2017, p. 62). Personnel are identified as any member of an organization, regardless of if it is a military member, government employee, nonprofit personnel, volunteer, teacher, student, coach, athlete, or any other affiliation within an organization. Additionally, adversely impacted is defined as anything that is not positively impacting the body, mind, emotion, spirit, and personal and professional of an individual. The theory that guided this study is leadership theory, which Max Weber is credited with creating the theory where leaders can positively and negatively impact subordinate satisfaction, performance, motivation, contribution, and worth (Ahmad et al., 2018; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebore, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Weber, 1922; Yukl, 1999).

Significance of the Study

There is limited research and little understanding of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Most people will encounter toxic leadership at an organization, which is why it is imperative that this topic be researched. This research study is significant as this area was not specifically studied, and many researchers recommended that new research should be conducted.

While there is an abundance of information on toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations, there is a shortage of information on followers and followership literature (Thomas, Gentzler, &

Salvatorelli, 2016). This study assisted in this knowledge gap by turning the focus to people who encounter the phenomenon of toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations and what their natural perceptions truly are (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Ozer et al., 2017). Having a description of the lived experience is truly important (van Manen, 2016) as better understanding leads to educating leaders, organizations, and followers.

Having real discussions, instead of quantitative surveys being the primary data collection method, about the lived experience led to a more well-rounded research study (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; van Manen, 2016). Finding the hidden costs (MacLennan, 2017; K. R. Williams, 2017), impact of the adverse environment to each person (Gardner et al., 2016), and other components (Mowchan, Lowe, & Reckers, 2015) were essential to building the knowledge base of this phenomenon. Understanding people's perceptions, reality, how the negative and adverse environment and leaders impacted them, their feelings, and how or if they were able to cope was vital knowledge to be gathered (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2016; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016).

Since the essence of the lived experience is now known, it may create opportunities for organizations and its leaders to better understand what personnel in toxic environments are up against and may result in the managers to become better leaders (Razik & Swanson, 2010). Personal experience, theory and conjecture will no longer be the foundation of knowledge for the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Those adversely impacted were able to tell their stories and there will be coded data with themes that tied together with literature to provide a better picture to those who belong to organizations, organizations themselves, leaders, and academia to influence change in organizations and the way they lead.

There are also leadership theorists who sternly believe that adversely impacted personnel may actually be the instigators of their own environment and are exaggerating their perceptions. Additionally, some of these same theorists believe that if these individuals ceased their attitudes and other behaviors, this may reduce the acts of those in power. Lastly, some believe that the simple implementation of ethics will resolve most, if not all, of the negative culture and environment that personnel face (Rhodes & Badham, 2018). This research did not set out to prove or disprove these theories but provided greater insight to the thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and actions by those who are adversely impacted by toxic or destructive leaders and organizations.

Research Questions

The research questions confirmed the need to better understand the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Since the purpose of this research study was to describe the essence of the lived experience of the adversely impacted personnel, the following central research and sub questions were the foundation of this research study:

Central Research Question

What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations? Based on each individual's situation, needs, maturity, ambition, worldview, background, experience, values, ethics, morals, and confidence (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016), the reality of each lived experience is different. The answers to this central question helped capture the essence and common themes of this research.

Sub Question 1

How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment?

Toxicity within an organization results in good personnel to leave, reduce output, become ill, and to look for other opportunities (Thomas et al., 2016).

Sub Question 2

How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing? Each individual can conform, collude, fly, fight, or freeze (Ozer et al., 2017; Padilla et al., 2007) among many other less prominent responses.

Sub Question 3

How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment? How the individuals coped and how their coping mechanisms played into their response to the toxic leadership and environment was a key aspect (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2016; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016).

Sub Question 4

What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment? A person's quality of life and mental, physical, and emotional health can be seriously impacted by a toxic leader and environment (Burns, 2017; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016).

Definitions

To help better understand this research study, listed below are definitions of certain terminology that is repeatedly utilized throughout this dissertation:

1. *Phenomenology* – A careful description of an everyday experience, as one experiences it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015; van Manen, 2016).

2. *Qualitative Research Study* – Known as qualitative inquiry, is the overarching designation for a social inquiry and trying to understanding the real meaning of human action (Schwandt, 2015).
3. *Culture* – Attitudes, feelings, values, ethics, morals, beliefs, and opinions that are shared by the majority of an organization and disseminated to all with ties to an organization (Rebore, 2014).
4. *Destructive Leadership* – The organization, leader, supervisor, manager, or administrator who damages or undermines the organization itself, its goals, success, and personnel (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010).
5. *Toxic Leadership* – Deliberate sabotaging, unethical, immoral, illegal, unethical, criminal, manipulative, and bullying behavior that a person with a position of influence can emotionally, mentally, and physically impact personnel within their surroundings (Burns, 2017; Pathak, 2017).
6. *Ethical Leadership* – Ongoing compassion, empowerment, collaboration, inclusivity, cooperation, support, and genuine interest within relationships within an organizational framework (Rhodes & Badham, 2018).
7. *Personnel* - Any member of an organization framework, regardless of the type of organization: military, police or fire department, healthcare, government, nonprofit, school, or sports team.
8. *Adversely Impacted* - Anything that is not positively impacting the body, mind, emotion, spirit, and personal and professional attributes of an individual.

9. *Leadership Theory* – An environment where leaders can positively and negatively influence subordinate satisfaction, performance, motivation, contribution, and worth (Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebores, 2014; Yukl, 1999).
10. *Bullying* – Supervisory mistreatment of personnel to include: Harassment, social exclusion, physical actions, emotional or mental mistreatment, victimization, hostility, discrimination, oppression, aggression, intimidation, resentment, demeaning, marginalizing, degrading, ridiculing, favoritism, coercion, forcing hardships, enlisting others to act against, and impacting one's work tasks repeatedly and over a period of time (Burns, 2017).
11. *Coping* – An adaptive and real time process that may be unconscious or involuntary, that intercedes with action or inaction between the stressor(s) and the environment (V. Webster et al., 2016).

Summary

The environment and culture of any organization is adversely impacted when toxic leadership takes hold. This environment alienates and isolates personnel and they will ultimately participate in fear, create strategies to avoid toxic leaders at all costs, keep opinions and ideas to themselves, evade conflict, and brace themselves for job termination (Powers et al., 2016; K. R. Williams, 2018). The context of this research study is extremely important because of the experiences that personnel live through have severe adverse implications for personnel within any organization. This issue impacts an unknown sector of the global population. The previously stated purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The outcome of organizational leaders' decisions, actions, and words positively or negatively influence the direction of the organization, which is what Max Weber was addressing in creating leadership theory (Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebore, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Weber, 1922; Yukl, 1999). When a negative organizational environment is festering, members will have to continuously navigate the treacherous waters. At first, personnel might unknowingly collaborate with toxic leadership as they are not aware of what the toxic leaders have in mind. Once personnel understand that the toxic individuals have an agenda, they will deliberately have to make choices. These choices include conforming, leaving, fighting, willingly or "quietly going along, or executing directly what the toxic manager wants or emulating them" (Thomas et al., 2016, p. 63). Those who maintain this course then become agents of the cause. Others may begin compromising, adjusting, or accommodating the new environment, which causes them to reveal or adjust their morals, ethics, or values (Barsky, 2014).

Many within an organization may completely avoid the changing culture by ignoring the entire situation, pretending it does not exist, making excuses for the behavior, denying the situation, evading those causing the conflict at all costs, or becoming so anxious that they will withdraw completely (Barsky, 2014); these are only some of the many psychological responses that personnel may have. These initial responses from impacted organizational members give rise to different subcultures, alliances, and other relationships that may not have otherwise formed. This chapter is comprised of four sections: Overview, theoretical framework, related literature, and summary.

Theoretical Framework

When an organizational environment is decaying, members will have to assess their own behavior in relation to the new reality. Personnel who are not effective followers initially may get caught up in the changing culture and negative energy (Thomas et al., 2016) as they do not fully understand the ramifications of the toxic managers or their own behaviors as toxic followers. Some of these individuals may be collaborating as they do not want to cause any trouble and put their own jobs in jeopardy (MacLennan, 2017). Adversely impacted personnel may be afraid to say something as it may impact them just like the others who are in the toxic manager's sights.

Some initial psychological responses of personnel may include: Pretending not to see or denying the toxic environment's existence, evading it, completely withdrawing from the situation, or conform to the changing environment by adjusting, compromising, or even refuting their own internal values (Barsky, 2014). These initial responses will align members into different subcultures, alliances, and other relationships that may not have otherwise formed. This is just one facet of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

Max Weber is credited with creating leadership theory. Weber showed that leaders can both positively and negatively influence subordinates' professional performance, focus, enthusiasm, involvement, impact and self-worth (Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebore, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Yukl, 1999). This research study is not focused on proving or disproving Weber or many others' theories on leadership; however, it is focused on the lived experiences of the personnel impacted by toxic leadership, organizational cultures, and environments. Weber's leadership theory provides insight that leaders have the ability and

capability to create the foundation for the hostile environment, which leads to the lived experience of the impacted personnel.

Related Literature

The purpose of this section is to provide a link from existing knowledge of this topic to this phenomenological study: Understanding the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. In order to better understand the lived experience, one must look at all of the contributing factors of the environment, organizational culture, and leaders. With the recent advent of leadership theory and extremely scarce research on the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership, the foundations of specific topics of adverse leadership and toxic organizational culture will be provided for better understanding of the problem.

Illegitimate Sources of Influence

Any individuals within the leadership team that are not continuously empowering their subordinates or are bullying them, are not remotely leaders at all. Poor results, a steady decline in the culture, or an outright bottoming of the organization are just some of the consequences if leaders use illegitimate sources of influence or intimidation, such as personality, power, and their positions (Aasland et al., 2010; Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). Toxic attitudes, disrespect, broken communication, and subordinates' lack of motivation, knowledge, and confidence are other examples of the consequences of toxicity in an organization (Moore, Coe, Adams, Conlon, & Sargeant, 2015). Regardless of the consequences, leaders of an organization should always set the example (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015a; Hill, 2013) and maintain their values, morals, and ethics as they shape the environment and organizational culture.

Leading by example should always be at the forefront of each leader's thoughts. Every leader must continue, improve, or begin implementing positive behavior and actions. These positive actions can positively impact those within their sphere of influence and trickle to other areas (Dannenberg, 2015; Qiu, Zhang, Hou, & Wang, 2018). Every leader's actions are heard, seen, talked about, felt, perceived, or copied by others, so organizational managers must understand that they are always leading by example (Schrage, 2016), whether positively or negatively. Leading by positive example can create relationships of trust, followership, and growth (Qiu et al., 2018).

However, leading through intimidation sets the environment where members of organizations will act or follow out of fear or self-preservation. Managers who use intimidation as a tool may lead their subordinates to less productivity, errors and accidents in their work, increased rates of burn-out, depression, and even suicide as the intimidation may be extremely precise (Hernandez, McCoy, Chavez, Wertz, & Payne, 2018). This type of example sets an extremely toxic tone for any organization.

If the proper example is not set, toxicity and mistrust may ensue, and personnel of an organization will encounter and have to live through it. In certain circumstances, toxic managers or organizations may actually encourage and condone deviant behavior by lower level managers, thus creating or enlarging the undesirable conditions and toxic environment (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015a). Creating silos of mistrust assist in the breeding of overall mistrust and uncertainty within an organization. Silos can be much easier to manage and manipulate over a large group of like-minded, empowered people. This toxic influence, while fairly common, is extremely detrimental to any organization and is a serious threat to the organization's personnel (Boddy, 2017).

Many toxic managers are focused on preserving the position they occupy (Thoroughgood et al., 2018; Vreja, Balan, & Bosca, 2016). They have little time to be effective and productive because the priority has shifted from focusing on the mission of the organization to personal protection. If the organization is not already fully encompassed in a toxic environment, these toxic individuals will quickly steer the organization in that direction. The threat must be neutralized as quickly as possible before the illegitimate source of influence infects the entire organization.

Toxicity

There are multiple definitions, terms, and catchphrases that are used to attempt to identify an adverse, negative, or toxic environment or culture. The phrase “toxic leader” was first identified by Wicker in 1996, however, there was no definition associated with the phrase, nor is there a definition agreed upon by theorists (Green, 2014). In 2017, it was stated that toxicity referred to a pattern of counterproductive behaviors encompassing harmful leadership and abusive supervision, bullying, manipulation, control, and workplace incivility by shaming, passive hostility, team sabotage, indifference, negativity, and exploitation (K. R. Williams, 2017).

Toxicity within an organization is due to a high degree of incompetence at the highest leadership levels (Seago, 2016) and results in good personnel leaving the organization, which ultimately puts the survival of the organization at risk (Thomas et al., 2016). In a toxic environment, most of the toxic leaders will not care about the harm they inflicted on individuals or the organization and will normally not have any guilt, remorse, regret, shame, or accepting blame, even if they suffer actual repercussions, such as job termination, official complaint procedures, or being entangled in investigations or official or legal enforcement (Walker &

Jackson, 2017). They are only focused on taking care of themselves, which will further contribute to the abusive and counterproductive behavior.

Insecure managers believe this method of leadership is more effective than improving and expanding their own knowledge base. If a manager is seen learning basic skills that were possibly missed during their formative career years or schooling, the manager can be perceived as incapable, inept, or not qualified. However, when subordinate employees see leaders who take time to learn new skills or brush up on updated processes, that vulnerability can cause subordinates to look at their superiors differently and in a more positive outlook. The subordinates and peers realize the value of personal and professional growth at even the highest levels of the organization.

As toxicity takes over an organization, there are numerous leaders who can step up and stop the progression but often choose to take no action. This happens as organizational leaders do not know how to deal with the toxicity, choose not to address it as they are benefitting personally or professionally, are so focused on results, may capitalize on the toxicity (K. R. Williams, 2017), or have such a *laissez-faire* attitude (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016; Boddy et al., 2015). This lack of action creates an even worse situation as there are toxic leaders, those that enable the toxic leadership, and the overall toxicity within the organization which is detrimental. One facet of the phenomenon is where someone will later disclose that they knew improper behavior was occurring but did not speak up because they could not fully verify the depths of wrongdoing of a manager or the toxic environment in general. Instead of questioning the narrative, it was easier to assume the impacted individual was being sensitive. However, there are also many risks in questioning the narrative and openly supporting the adversely impacted person. The toxic leader or organization may target these personnel as well. This is

where personnel must make decisions, they must attempt to change the environment to where it is acceptable to respectfully question organizational practices without directly placing blame. This is the first step in fostering an environment where personnel believe they as human beings are valued, rather than just their skillset.

Leadership, both good and bad, has been studied at length by many professionals, researchers, and in the United States military professional environment. Since strong leadership is considered the foundation to success, training and developing leaders have always been a priority with service members and civilians. If a toxic leader is identified as counter-productive to the mission, it is likely steps will be taken for removal (K. R. Williams, 2019). Removing a leader can be a complicated process with many hurdles involved. To remove a high-level toxic leader could create a perception that the leadership chain has been weakened, which can undermine the group's ability to continue the mission.

An ethics survey performed by the National Government Ethics Survey found that 23% of federal employees witnessed abusive behavior in their workplace environment (K. R. Williams, 2019). While there are avenues to report such behavior, such as Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Office of Special Counsel (OSC), or the Inspector General (IG), employees will often shy away from reporting. Figures released by the federal government estimate less than one-third of personnel who file complaints of discrimination, harassment, or other illegal behavior in the federal workplace win their cases (EEOC, 2019), even with substantiating proof of the harassing and toxic behavior. Many of the cases that are dismissed by the EEOC are due to lack of proof or that the harassment, adverse treatment, immoral, or unethical behavior was in fact verifiable but did not fall under the purview of the EEOC. Additionally, the time it takes to complete a complaint with the EEOC normally ranges

between six to twelve months, but can be up to five years for a case to be litigated (EEOC, 2019), it can be a discouraging and expensive undertaking for even the most abused employees. Since the possibility of change seems minimal at best, many employees who witness toxic and abusive behavior will look the other way and suffer from the toxic managers in silence and without the possibility of relief.

Many researchers and writers have discussed the value of good leadership and the cost of poor leadership. Countless articles, journals, and other research have stated that there are several tenants to strong leadership. These different research studies specifically discuss the damage that a toxic leader's ego or environment can cause. One of the most recent surveys performed by the government show that the calculated cost of just one toxic or abusive manager could cost each impacted employee nearly 16 hours of lost productivity per 40 hour work week (K. R. Williams, 2019). This lost productivity is due to an employee's avoidance, worrying, talking about environment, toxicity, or leader, absenteeism, and doctor's appointments (K. R. Williams, 2019). However, this study did not take into account the reduced productivity (Chung & Jackson, 2011) during the other 24 work hours during the 40 hour work week.

Self-interest above the good of the organization can cause leaders to lose sight of the mission, as well as the good of those who serve the mission. The old adage that power can be intoxicating is sometimes not far from the truth. Leaders do not start out as either effective or toxic, but rather cultivate these behaviors and characteristics over time. When toxic behavior is identified and subsequently ignored, it creates a breeding ground for worsening bad habits that eventually lead to consistent behavior.

This breeds the most conducive environment for toxicity, as instability, lack of checks and balances, lack of cultural values are the building blocks for the negative culture and

environment (Powers et al., 2016), which ultimately impacts personnel by deviant behavior: Destructive gossip, politics, abuse, theft, absenteeism, targeting, passive aggressive leadership, harassment, bullying, aggression, mental warfare, pulling people down, and unfair policies (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015a; TaŞTan, 2017). Negative, hostile, and toxic organizational environments and cultures are normally not led by one or even a few individuals, it is normally created, embedded, and mostly undetected in the organization over a long period of time (van Rooij & Fine, 2018).

Any sincerity, modesty, and fairness the organization had then turned into greed, exploitation, privilege, dishonest, selfishness, cheating, and vengeful behavior (Templer, 2018). Some destructive, psychopathic, and toxic leaders will even go so far as to measure their success based on the damage they can inflict on others, not only the individuals, but their supporters and families (Green, 2014). A destructive leader's ego and power are intoxicating influences on personnel and the overall culture at an organization while the same leader could be compassionate and kind with their own family and friends. Slowly but surely, this dysfunctional situation recruits personnel in positions of influence and eventually sways the direction of the organization, if it was not already on that track. Most toxic leaders are extremely skilled at hiding their actions, behavior, abuse, manipulation, and harassment from leaders in higher positions or the organization as a whole (Green, 2014).

Trust

Leaders in an organization must create an environment of trust. Trust is the necessary foundational pillar that creates the framework for a positive organizational culture and environment, the basis for quality interaction between personnel, and enhancing everyone's belief in the organization and its leaders (Bulatova, 2015). The perception or belief in the

trustworthiness of leaders within the organization leads personnel to believe that they are valued members of the organization, are more likely to follow leaders' initiatives, show increased motivation, are more effective, and feel closer to personnel in leadership positions (Pučetaitè et al., 2015).

However, the lack of trust in organizations is the precursor of many other problems within an organization. If it is the perception of individuals in the organization that its leaders are not trustworthy, the environment and pulse of an organization can quickly change as it is a grave issue (Burns, 2017; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016). The lack of trust most likely adds to other visible toxic issues within the organization, which breeds uncertainty, lack of productivity, commitment, sharing of information, knowledge creation, reduced task interdependency, changes in perception, forming of alliances, self-preservation, and diminished efficiency (Chung & Jackson, 2011). One must think of an organization as a complex and adaptive social system (Curren, Marques-Quinteiro, Gomes, & Lind, 2016) where the lack of trust in leaders will quickly change the complex social system that was previously intact and successful.

Once the leadership perceives that their subordinates do not have trust in them, the leader must make a choice: Change or don't. If the leader attempts to change, there will be a long road to regaining everyone's trust. Many toxic leaders will forgo this effort as they may feel that it is the subordinates who are causing the issue or the misperception. If a toxic manager realizes that they are hurting the organization or its people, they may not want to change their leadership style as they think it could be viewed by superiors, peers, and subordinates as weak and done solely to placate the personnel who have lodged complaints. Rather than doing the manipulation, they believe others will see them as victims of manipulation. This may lead to managers targeting

individuals or groups, isolating individuals, creating allies with likeminded and toxic individuals, and possibly creating a hostile environment filled with bullying, harassment, and other types of negative engagements (Bulatova, 2015; Chung & Jackson, 2011; Covelli & Mason, 2017; Puçétaitè et al., 2015).

Leaders' decisions

Leaders are always faced with many decisions that must be made. Results from decision that are made can be beneficial, indifferent, negative, or disastrous for an organization and its people. Decisions made by organizational leaders not only impact the organization, but its personnel as well (Campbell, Whitehead, & Finkelstein, 2009). As part of leadership, decisions that contribute to the adverse environment are based on self-benefit or for others, distorting attachments, poor or no self-awareness, contrary interpersonal style, bias, emotion, direct or passive hostility, blaming others, shaming, bullying, suspicion, and may be based on targets, witnesses, or groups of personnel already suffering (Campbell et al., 2009; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; K. R. Williams, 2018).

Decisions must be made that reflect the organization's principles, value dignity, are lawful, just, fair, competent, efficient, truthful, moral, ethical and credible (Mowchan et al., 2015; Ozer et al., 2017; Powers et al., 2016; K. R. Williams, 2018). The leader making these decisions should maintain self-accountability and accountability to others. Most personnel in positions of power and influence, who assisted in the creation of the toxic environment, will most likely not hold themselves or let others hold them accountable for their decisions. This may also lead to the hiring and promotion of personnel who will enable the idea that all decisions made are correct. These horrible and dysfunctional decisions will most likely not be uncovered

as part of the overall malfunctioning organization until it is too late (Pathak, 2017; Vreja et al., 2016).

If a decision is made that does meet the organization's desired end state but is not along moral or ethical lines or its organizational values, leadership must find other ways to reach their mark, just like if a decision or direction does not lead to the finish line itself. Both internal to a leader and within the organization must have a system of checks and balances (Campbell et al., 2009) to evaluate not only the immediate feasibility of a decision for the betterment of the organization, but whether it is moral, ethical, upholds organizational values, and how it impacts the organization and its personnel (Flynn, 2008). Even if all assessments of the decision come back that it is moral, ethical, and along organizational values, it may not be in the best interest of its personnel.

An appropriate example would be an organization that utilizes its reserves or employee pension funds to provide for organizational growth, with the potential outcome of the organization making significant profit. While all possible outcomes look positive, there is no sure thing, there could be one unknown variable that can wreak havoc on any plan. Even with all of the best intentions, all invested monies in the growth initiative could be wiped out and the organization could have only operating funds to keep it afloat. All while its reserves or employee pension funds are depleted. Once an organization reaches this state, how does it fund the employee pensions or reserve funds? Most likely, employees will be released or retiring employees will not receive their pensions.

However, in the same scenario, what if the organization took more time to look at and consider the potential downfall risks or at least how to mitigate those risks? Would the employees still be let go or retired employees not receive their pensions? Instead of falling in

love or committing blindly with the plans or potential positive outcomes, leaders must not over or under plan, think, and make decisions without having the people of the organization, and even those outside the organization, in the forefront of their minds (Campbell et al., 2009; Flynn, 2008).

Outright destructive and malicious decisions by leaders are another avenue for personnel to be adversely impacted. As I previously highlighted, every decision a leader makes can immensely impact people's health, wellbeing, livelihood, families, and even their lives (Campbell et al., 2009; Dehring et al., 2018; Kuoppala et al., 2008; Uysal, 2019; V. Webster et al., 2016). Malicious decisions by leaders are incompatible with their subordinate personnel and organization as a whole (Uysal, 2019), where the leader gains pleasure at the misfortune and potential downfall of those they are targeting (Walker & Jackson, 2017). Many destructive leaders identify their success with how much they can control and tear down others with their malicious decisions (Pathak, 2017). Some of the malicious decisions are employed to reduce subordinates' morale, self-worth, self-esteem, motivation, communication, and cooperation (Burns, 2017; Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2016; Powers et al., 2016). These decisions are bad for subordinates at best and most likely catastrophic for personnel and the organization as a whole.

Leaders Manipulating Laws, Rules, Policies, and Regulations

All organizations must have rules, policies, and regulations that are in place for the betterment of the organization, its mission, and personnel (Rodriguez & Brown, 2016). Personnel who are in positions of power or influence must be cognizant of this and should not only obey the letter of the regulations, policies, and rules, but also the spirit or intent of it (Hanson & Baker, 2017). In addition to obeying these organizational foundations, leaders must

ensure that personnel subordinate, adjacent, and higher follow them as well. If organizational personnel do not see that all others are following rules, regulations, and policies, some may take advantage and this is one avenue where toxic, destructive, or psychopathic leadership can take hold (Fennimore & Sementelli, 2016).

Translation, as in personal or convenient interpretation, of rules, regulations, and policies by those who influence or lead others is a ripe opportunity for toxic leaders to adversely impact personnel within an organization. Using rules for their benefit, policies to harm staff, and regulations to drive what is in their power to an end state that is not for the betterment of the organization and personnel are some examples of what one or several individuals do to create havoc (Hanson & Baker, 2017; Powers et al., 2016). If leaders in high positions within the organization see subordinate managers begin to do this and do not effectively stop it, they are just compounding the problem to the point that adversely impacted personnel will have nowhere to turn to. However, there are currently changes in the United States with organizations being created or revamped such as Safe Sport or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to be watchdogs, for individuals to go to file grievances, and that may force transparency of organizations in the future.

Lack of policies, rules, and regulations within organizations is a breeding ground for toxic leadership (Hanson & Baker, 2017). With the absence of these organizational foundations, toxic leaders can create rules as they go just because they feel like it and will not self-regulate as well (Covelli & Mason, 2017). One day a regulation or policy that they created may benefit the toxic leader and the next it may be detrimental and they can just as easily remove it as they did creating it.

All organizations must follow local, state, and federal laws. Equal employment opportunity, disability access, safety, taxes, fire and building codes, and many other laws are enacted for a safe environment for all personnel within organizations and the organizations themselves. Just like regulations, rules, and policies, laws have both the idea and letter of the law, both of which should always be upheld. However, toxic leaders can easily manipulate or completely ignore laws, which can result in injury, dismemberment, discrimination, disability, death, and other detrimental short- and long-term effects (Matos, O'Neill, & Lei, 2018; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). This manipulation does not only impact their subordinates, but will slowly infiltrate other areas within the organization.

Communication

A leaders' lack of communication can easily bring an organization down in an expedient matter, contribute to an unhealthy environment, and can quickly and negatively impact personnel. With a toxic environment, communication flow between many different individuals and groups begins to shut down and tension ensues (Moore et al., 2015). Regardless of the leaders' toxic focus, the absence of an open and two-way truthful line of communication will dramatically change the social composition of the organization (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016). Sometimes poor or untruthful communication can be intentional as a way to further harass or bully a target. However, poor communication is more commonly an unintentional act due to lack of communication skills. When an environment is ripe with distrust, this lack of skill can be perceived as a form of manipulation through information hoarding.

Depending on the goal of the leader, the leader can severely stunt forward progress in an organization with their lack of communication or control of information by influencing the adoption of initiatives (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016), decision making, working conditions,

environment, impacting subordinates' sense of security, health, opportunities, job satisfaction, (Uysal, 2019), dysfunctional leader, peer, and subordinate relationships, destructive outcomes (Thoroughgood et al., 2018), and setting subordinates up for conflict or failure. If toxic leaders do not communicate, especially if they are in positions where there is little to no oversight of their actions, these leaders will continue to strengthen their grips, control all information flow, and only use information to coerce individuals, influence negative incomes, and continue to isolate subordinates (Thoroughgood et al., 2018), and diminish the activity of the organization (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016). This will continue to erode the effectiveness of the subordinates and the overall effectiveness of the organization, especially if peer or senior leaders do not see, address, and counteract the lack of communication and its adverse impact by the toxic leader.

Without communication, peoples' expectations, feelings, rules, tasks, and other critical items are most likely not delivered (Walker & Jackson, 2017). Leaders that do not communicate may do so maliciously, with intent, and even to destroy others (Walker & Jackson, 2017) or may do so without any wickedness or unintentionally. In any case, leaders must be able to effectively communicate to all personnel. It does not matter how many times a leader can clearly and carefully communicate a direction, task, thought, or feeling to a subordinate, if the leader does not find multiple methods to reach each of their intended individuals, the message will not reach everyone (Knapp, 2019). This is a problem where segregation and isolation of individuals begins or is exacerbated due to lack of effective communication as opposed to strengthening the bond between leaders and subordinates (Betlejeski, 2017; Currall et al., 2016; Tolliver, 2018; K. R. Williams, 2018). This lack of communication, whether benign or purposeful, continues to

degrade the relationships between leader and subordinate and the environment and effectiveness of the organization.

In a recent research study, less than 45 percent of respondents stated that the leaders in their organizations were not prepared to listen nor were proactive or even active listeners when their subordinates discuss issues with them (Ngcamu & Teferra, 2015). As toxic leaders are also most likely poor listeners to begin with or are choosing to not listen (Gunderman, 2015) to their subordinates about the adverse conditions, poor decisions and continued or worse treatment of targeted subordinates is highly likely (Rodriguez & Brown, 2016). Leaders must carefully listen to their subordinates to evaluate what is truly taking place in the subordinate's eyes (Forsberg et al., 2018). If the leader is prepared to listen, then the issue or even just the perception of an issue may be resolved quickly and without any more stress (Ngcamu & Teferra, 2015) but toxic leaders will most likely choose not to listen, will become immediately defensive, or will just be completely dismissive.

However, if personnel choose not to communicate distress to those that can influence real change, the toxic leader will ultimately prevail in their current practices (Gunderman, 2015). Without communication, bullying practices will continue along with all of the associated negative impacts (Forsberg et al., 2018). If toxic leaders in an organization have not already realized the environment of high stress, conflict, ambiguity, unequal workloads, and overall poor organization (Gardner et al., 2016), the elements of trust, respect, efficiency, and productivity will continue to falter (K. R. Williams, 2017) without effective and timely communication from subordinates.

Without input from subordinates, whether solicited or not, leaders cannot develop or change the vision for the future (Wellman, 2017). The same is true for subordinates or peers to

provide feedback to leaders in adverse environments. Leaders do not have an opportunity to create change if they do not see the problems themselves and issues are not effectively communicated to them. While some subordinates cringe at the idea of trying to bring an issue to a toxic leader, the leader may not know what type of damage they are causing without knowledge of it. However, it is most likely that they believe toxic leaders will not listen to their subordinate and choose to only hear what they want, but subordinates must attempt to influence change from their position.

Another survey in 2014 reported that most complainants felt their concern were ignored, minimized or completely denied (Richardson, Hall, & Joiner, 2016). When a complaint goes unheard, levels of stress and anxiety arise, causing employees to increase the number of sick days taken to manage mental health (Richardson et al., 2016; K. R. Williams, 2019). It is estimated that US organizations will incur approximately \$5 billion in healthcare expenses related to psychological stress due to workplace issues (Richardson et al., 2016).

Inclusion

Leaders and organizations that create hostile and toxic environments will not be inclusive to its members and may even attempt to shut out any opinions, discussions, or complaints as they will have no interest (Seago, 2016). These leaders will not provide opportunities for cooperation, trust, leadership, education, and development of individuals and groups. However, hostile leaders may task their subordinates but will heavily micromanage them to no end and will most likely not delegate any tasks (Boddy et al., 2015; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016), with the exception of work they have no interest in or for the opportunity to punish or shift blame to someone (Roter, 2011). These leaders will ensure that someone will be included only if it serves

a purpose for the toxic environment and not because it would help make the organization stronger.

The toxic leaders will only include “yes men” or others that will conform to the toxic leaders’ ways (Seago, 2016) or assist them in the professional misconduct (V. Webster et al., 2016). The benefit for the toxic leader is that the environment is exclusive and only for those who are willing to sell their souls, in the form of setting aside their morals, values, and ethics. The outcome is disastrous for the organization and only helps the toxic leader for as long as they are in power.

Leaders that do take the time to include personnel, their ideas, knowledge, and strengths help the organization, its processes, and practices become more successful (Cherman & Rocha-Pinto, 2016). Including all individuals, regardless of their background, experience, education, or position ensures that all those within the organization feel respected, valued, part of the team and organizational culture, trusted, develop bonds with others and the organization itself, and will motivate personnel in many aspects that are all beneficial to the organization (Pučėtaitė et al., 2015). Inclusion invites personnel to provide input to the decision making process at all levels, increases productivity (Uysal, 2019), and will be beneficial as it will assist in warding off toxic individuals.

Manipulation

Toxic leaders manipulate any and every situation possible to maintain or increase their control. Lying and deception are common tools used in the manipulation tactics of these leaders (V. Webster et al., 2016). Manipulation is a way for toxic managers to will obedient behavior.

The psychopathic leader’s self-interest is in preservation and deception is the vehicle that is widely utilized (Fennimore & Sementelli, 2016). The leader will promise security, certainty

and other direct or indirect benefits for those who comply (Winn & Dykes, 2019). These leaders at the same time will drive at the heart of each person's emotions (Grieve, March, & Van Doorn, 2019). This emotional manipulation will ultimately take advantage of each subordinate by the psychopathic leader.

Pitting individuals against each other, creating conflict, or dissent (V. Webster et al., 2016) are just examples of the contests the toxic leaders conjure up to continue their abuse (Matos et al., 2018). Toxic managers will manipulate personnel by creating resentment, cliques, and decaying the authority of those they are targeting (Winn & Dykes, 2019). Toxic managers will often manipulate others emotions in order to shape the small group, office, unit, or organization to their benefit (Grieve et al., 2019), which many times will create difficult interpersonal relationships within the organization.

Taking credit for subordinates or peer work is another manipulation tactic often used by toxic leaders (Green, 2014; Pelletier, 2012). At the same time, toxic managers will be quick to marginalize others, discrediting those who they may be targeting (Green, 2014), or subordinates who may be trying to oppose them (Hanson & Baker, 2017). This helps turn up the feeling of fear within an organization and adversely impacts subordinates, regardless of the fact that they were most likely doing what they were told and also creates insecurity in an employee who is already vulnerable.

Undermining

Another tactic used by toxic leaders is undermining their subordinates. Speaking ill of a subordinate leader to their personnel or peers is completely detrimental to their abilities to lead. Ultimately, undermining individuals will lead to lower employee output and the same employees not trusting those around them within the organization (Gavin, Gavin, & Quick, 2017).

A common of method that abusive leaders use while undermining others is to reduce the self-worth, efficacy, and dignity of the individual (Pathak, 2017) while shining light on their shortfalls for others to see. Whether these shortfalls are true or not, the perception of others is that these called out individuals are inept and might be the reason the toxicity of the organization is prevalent. The amount of chaos that the toxic leader brings with undermining others exacerbates the tension that was already conjured by the psychopathic manager (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010). This tactic may buy considerable authority and even time for the toxic leader and it may lead to others being highlighted as well.

Any successful undermining results in a negative bias and the erosion of relationships of the impacted individual (Gavin et al., 2017; Hinojosa et al., 2014) where the individual may end up receiving an official reprimand, reduction in responsibilities and authority, and even termination of employment. The undermining then proves successful for the toxic manager as their main goals are to achieve professional gain while also harming individuals and the organization (Templer, 2018). While this method may be a short-term gain for a psychopathic leader, having one less individual for an organization to blame for toxicity may bring the abusive leader and their shenanigans to the attention to the senior leaders of the organization (Aasland et al., 2010). However, if the senior leaders within an organization are also toxic or indifferent, then that manager will be able to continue on with their destructive ways and the organization will continue to disintegrate.

Volatility

Volatility is not an attribute that many researchers of toxic leadership or cultures highlight in their research. Many of the same researchers infer that a toxic leader may have been volatile or that subordinates believed there was volatility towards themselves or others. Volatile

managers can create confusion and easily corrode the culture and environment of an organization.

However, Burns (2017) identified that any emotional volatility is closely related to abusive behavior and bullying, which correlates with toxic leadership. This emotional volatility includes spectacles as simple as slamming a fist on the desk to throwing a temper tantrum when the mission or a milestone is not met (Pelletier, 2012). Volatility could be inherent in any individual but is commonly displayed by abusive leaders.

Personnel Choosing to Fight, Flight, or Freeze

One of the many results of toxicity and hostile environment within an organization is bullying and targeting from those in power. This has extremely adverse impacts on many, to include psychological and physical health (Dehring et al., 2018; M. Webster, 2016). Anxiety, stress, low performance, stigmatism, low efficiency and attendance, lack of commitment, and victimization (Dehring et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2016; Millage, 2016) are many of the unfortunate results of this environment. How each person within an organization responds to this situation differs from other personnel.

Since there are few studies that specifically research the response of each individual, it is unknown how each individual would respond. However, it is imperative to understand that a member within an organization that fights, flights, or freezes, must be due to behaviors that they perceive as harmful, destructive, volatile, manipulative, narcissistic, abusive, intimidating, and bullying (V. Webster et al., 2016). This does not mean that if an organizational member does not fight, flight, or freeze, that there is not a toxic manager, leader, environment, or culture that is adversely impacting them.

It is unknown how each member of an organization will respond and cope to the rapidly degrading environment, as there have been several studies on the emotional, psychological, and physical consequences with no finality (V. Webster et al., 2016). In order for personnel to evade the dysfunctional environment, fractured organizational culture, destruction, and the lasting personal and professional damage (Ozer et al., 2017), each person will naturally fight, flee, or freeze (V. Webster et al., 2016). Instead of evading or fleeing the environment, one could also identify and voice the issue (Millage, 2016), however, it may cause additional targeting from leaders within the organization and may make the environment and culture much worse than imaginable.

Long-Term Impacts

There have been recent studies and statistics that have begun to scratch the surface of the adverse long-term effects and impact of those working under toxic leadership or organizations. Toxic leadership's long-term impact on job satisfaction is just one area of focus for researchers. Job satisfaction is directly correlated to the reaction of employees to the organizational culture, environment, management, detractors, coworkers, actors, conditions, and dimensions of a position of employment (Chung-Hsuan & Ting-Ya, 2017; Djordjević, Ivanović-Djukić, & Lepojević, 2017; Golpayegan, 2017; Sharma, 2017; Uysal, 2019). Most employees search for jobs and careers with organizations that have similar values, ethics, morals, and worldviews as their own (Swanson, Billsberry, Kent, Skinner, & Mueller, 2020; Uysal, 2019; Wnuk, 2017), which stem from the comfortable environment in which they were raised. Therefore, it is extremely important to understand the correlation between how job satisfaction can be severely degraded by toxic leadership.

If a member of an organization is being adversely impacted by toxic leadership, it will become difficult for job satisfaction to remain at acceptable levels. It is the entire organization that must provide an environment to sustain each member's job satisfaction. This satisfaction will result in the maintaining or increasing efficiency of each person (Uysal, 2019). However, toxic leadership, environment, and culture can all be contributors of any individual's inefficiency (Golpayegan, 2017). In addition to the lack of efficiency, other and potentially worse byproducts come from toxic leadership and its impact on job satisfaction. Employees with lower job satisfaction due to toxic leadership may also be isolated, bullied, retaliated against (Uysal, 2019; V. Webster et al., 2016), and many other adverse actions that may result in the rapid decline or outright elimination of any job satisfaction itself.

Low morale, motivation, commitment, and other negative emotions and behaviors are a direct result of toxic leadership and their consequences can also detract from any job satisfaction (Uysal, 2019). The extremely toxic environment and culture, which adversely impacts each individual and the organization, continuously degrades their job satisfaction to the point of no return. This unique piece of the phenomenon can be a further area of research as it has only begun to be looked at.

Voicing Concerns

In a toxic environment the difficulty in voicing a complaint is the preconceived notion that complaints are a form of unhappiness, or personnel are just complaining. This association takes the presented issue and makes it personal. When toxic managers, who already lead with ego, receive a complaint from personnel within their organization, it can be difficult to discern genuine issue with personal attack. If a leader cannot separate the two, the reaction can be defensive.

If the subordinate employee believes their complaint is not being heard or received, it is possible they withdraw altogether (Ahmad et al., 2018). It is already a difficult task to formulate and then communicate issues in the workplace. The old adage of life is not fair can foster the idea that speaking about any imbalance in the workplace is something only a child would do. Knowing that it can be incredibly difficult to make a complaint in the first place, leaders should take caution when formulating a reaction.

The complexity of this dynamic can become even more dysfunctional when some personnel view a toxic leader as somewhat of a hero (Fennimore & Sementelli, 2016). Subordinates who are intimidated by toxic leaders or those who are being groomed as toxic managers can contribute to the hostile environment and make it even more difficult for anyone to voice opposing views. Since toxic behavior is fueled by insecurity and ego, any changes to the environment could be perceived as a threat to the toxic leader, forcing them to alter or increase their behavior.

A toxic leader will not lead by example, but rather intimidation and fear. This style of leadership does not necessarily equate to lack of skill, but a redirection of energy toward leading with a negative and forceful method (Burns, 2017). When toxic leaders are blinded by their own ego and copious amounts of arrogance, it can be confusing for even the most logical subordinate. This style of leadership is so powerful that even the strongest performer can question whether or not their concerns are valid, especially if the psychopathic manager has a strong following from other personnel. With a slow erosion of trust and growing manipulation, coupled with a sense of isolation in feeling as though everyone else seems to be fine, subordinates are less likely to be heard by even those who are in lateral positions, impacting organizational citizenship behavior (Hitchcock, 2015).

When colleagues work as a team and share ideas, organizational citizenship behavior increases (Chung & Jackson, 2011; Hitchcock, 2015). This professional relationship is not a workplace requirement, but rather a personal choice between one or more personnel within an organization to work in a collaborative environment to achieve successful outcomes. Employees who exude this behavior are willing to go the extra mile for their organizations (Moore et al., 2015). Going beyond what is minimally required to achieve greatness, at no financial gain, positively impacts the overall culture of any organization. This type of initiative can be diminished when toxic leaders strive to create an “us versus them” culture in an effort to isolate the high performing personnel (Burns, 2017). Lack of cohesion, consistent organizational stress, and job dissatisfaction assist a toxic leader in maintaining the unhealthy organizational culture they have created or helped to create for their own personal gain (Burns, 2017) and are detrimental to not only those that they are targeting.

Toxic Followership

Another natural response for a person in an adverse culture or environment is to become a toxic follower. Toxic followers will not defend victims of abuse, harassment, bullying, or any other poor treatment (Forsberg et al., 2018). Toxic followers, sometimes known as “yes men” (Seago, 2016), quickly become agents for the toxic regime (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016). Just like toxic leaders and organizations, toxic followers are not concerned for subordinates or peers, are self-serving and only focused on their own welfare and those that are beneficial for them, and reinforce the degrading climate, culture and environment of the organization (Templer, 2018; Thomas et al., 2016). These toxic followers amplify and join forces with the toxic leader or the organization as a whole, thus continuing the onslaught of toxicity that the

organization continues to press on its adversely impacted members, creating an even worse situation.

Toxic followers prohibit most opportunities for organizations and subordinates to cultivate a new path, team building, and for anything positive to progress (Guttman & Longman, 2006). Toxic followers are also known as survivors, who continuously adapt to their environments and influence negative leaders to carry out evil acts (Thomas et al., 2016). These individuals have informed, general, and situational awareness about how to react to any given intentional or unintentional situation, who the toxic leaders and vulnerable subordinates are, how to apply this to their benefit (Forsberg et al., 2018), and how to employ or hurt others to reach their desired goal or end-state.

Toxic followers come in two forms: conformers who have a low level of maturity, low values, and unmet personal or professional needs; and colluders who have ambition, horrible values, and a similar world view as the toxic leaders (Powers et al., 2016). In either form, these followers wreak havoc on an organization and its people, where some will most likely be impacted throughout their lives, long after the toxic environment disappears, the organization dissolves, or the exodus of personnel. As conformers or colluders, toxic followers will participate in unethical behavior, entangle others and recruit, carryout fraudulent orders or requests from toxic leaders (Mowchan et al., 2015), and do everything possible to prohibit authentic opportunities for negatively impacted personnel to voice individual or group issues to attempt to right the adverse climate (Armitage, 2015).

Changing the Environment and Empowering Personnel

While an organization may be severely impacted by a negative culture and environment, it does not mean that the situation cannot be changed. If senior leaders, a board of directors, or

an agency that assists those whose rights are violated cannot or will not intervene in a timely or acceptable manner, it must be up to those impacted to create change (MacLennan, 2017).

Impacted personnel, while unable or unwilling to assess and take appropriate measures, must problem solve and attempt to circumvent the sources of toxicity (Vreja et al., 2016). These personnel must arm themselves with training and education, create avenues for communication, and find and implement prevention strategies.

The impacted individuals must find supportive leaders to employ a quality organizational culture and attempt to influence change at the highest possible levels (Betlejeski, 2017; Gunderman, 2015; Roter, 2011). Personnel must be responsible and report and deter all antagonistic behavior at all times, even if it puts them in uncomfortable situations, to include becoming a target. If the impacted personnel take charge, unite, create a safe environment, and influence change together, their chances of success are much higher than attempting to accomplish this as individuals (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011) as an organization should be an exchange of information, emotions, fundamentals, social interactions, and support from all personnel (Bulatova, 2015).

If impacted personnel are able to find leaders in the organization to get involved, education and training for the organization is sorely needed. This training would separately be for executive leaders, managers, and subordinates so each group becomes knowledgeable to their roles in a toxic environment and culture, how to identify the issues contributing to the issue, and how to change course and influence positive change. The training must be comprehensive for all groups in order for it to truly work, not just throwing some slides on a screen. This training must be fully comprehensive, not only in the classroom, but planning, real-time training, mentoring, and evaluations to ensure that positive and effective change is actually taking place for the

benefit of the organization, especially those who were suffering through the toxicity (Kusy & Holloway, 2014).

However, most toxic organizations will not go to these extents because they do not see a problem. The toxic organization and leaders will most likely ignore the problem, even when concerns are raised, maybe disciplining the toxic individuals with the hope for change or will just wait for personnel turnover, whether toxic leaders or impacted subordinates, to hopefully see the environment and culture change. Organizational leaders must find ways to support the organization and its personnel, otherwise the toxic environment and culture will continue to dominantly be in force.

Personnel, whether assisted by positive leaders or not, must find ways to empower themselves and create an environment of support and not toxicity using the bottom up approach (Bingaman & Johnston, 2016). The impacted individuals must find what is successful and not successful, which perceptions can be changed, and figure out what change is truly realistic to successfully navigate the toxic environment and share it with others, including toxic leaders and followers. This will help increase the impacted personnel's self-efficacy, confidence, and self-awareness and may ease interactions (Bingaman & Johnston, 2016) in order to endure or change the dynamics.

Changing the culture, environment, and culture of the organization is a monumental challenge. However, the change should be focused on present and future personnel, what the vision is, and why it is so important (van Rooij & Fine, 2018). Changing the toxic norms and stimulating meaningful change is the only way to support adversely impacted and all personnel. Personnel must convince the organization to change, demand actual change, and must hold its organization and leaders accountable (van Rooij & Fine, 2018).

However, many of the suggestions, studies, articles, and books that are in circulation today do not have the true essence of what the adversely impacted population goes through and experiences during the phenomenon. Discussing coping mechanisms and ways to be agents of positive change are worthwhile should be implemented in all organizations, whether they are toxic or not.

Each person who is adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations will respond differently to the ever-changing toxic barrage that they encounter. Providing research on how one should cope and change the organization, when they are paralyzed from the onslaught of harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by the toxic leaders and adverse environments. These real responses have severe adverse implications for personnel and should not be overlooked, deemed inconsequential or taken lightly. This is an essential reason that this research study was incredibly important, to effectively address what the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership truly is.

Summary

While this is not a new or emerging phenomenon, leaders and organizations did not recently begin creating toxic environments, recognition of this behavior is a recently researched subject. Through study of toxic leadership, it has been identified that corruption of leadership behaviors and relationships has been a destructive force and has created hostile and toxic environments for personnel (TaŞTan, 2017). The theoretical value of this research filled a gap in literature concerning toxic leadership and organizations by providing a clear voice to those personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and their description of the essence of the environment.

The practical value of this research provided greater insight for those leaders of organizations and those who may experience a toxic, destructive, or hostile environment or organizational culture and an understanding of the thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and actions by those who are adversely impacted by this environment. This research will help keep personnel safe against detrimental conduct of toxic leaders by understanding the phenomenon through the lived experience. This understanding will also help pinpoint the nature, prevalence, and presence of toxic organizations and leaders (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015b). However, this will not remove the threat of hostile, psychopathic, or toxic leaders, culture, or environment in any organization.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This was research that had not been fully explored by other researchers and studies. This chapter presented the design, restated the research questions, discussed the site, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and ends with a summary.

Design

The type of methodology that was selected for this research study was qualitative. Qualitative research was best suited to understanding the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This problem understandably required qualitative research as quantitative research would not have been able to convey the lived experience properly. One of the primary reasons that a qualitative methodology was selected was because any of Creswell and Poth's five qualitative designs: Phenomenology, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative (2018) could have been used for this research study. In this case, phenomenology was the best type of design as I wanted to describe the human experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

Phenomenological research is the "study of the lived experience" (van Manen, 2016, p. 75), this research design mirrored the type of research I wanted to present. To take it one step further, an interpretation of the essence of the lived experience was needed. Hermeneutic phenomenological design, which literally means "descriptive (Phenomenological) and interpretive (Hermeneutic) methodology where there are no uninterpreted phenomena" (van

Manen, 2016, p. 180), directly addressed the way I wanted to conduct research on the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Hermeneutics was founded by Martin Heidegger with the idea that the researcher should not be “aimed at re-experiencing another’s experience but rather the power to grasp one’s own possibilities for being in the world in certain ways” (van Manen, 2016, p. 180). Just like phenomenology, “hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived (Lavery, 2003, p. 24). However, hermeneutic phenomenology shows that each human lived experience is always interpretive (van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology is exactly the direction that the research study led me as it was crucial to fully describe the human experience. I wanted to interpret this phenomenon utilizing the best method vice researching, collecting, and analyzing the data using other qualitative or quantitative means as it would not paint a true picture and would be a disservice for those adversely impacted by toxic leadership or reading this study.

While conducting research on the essence of the experience of others during this phenomenon is incredibly important (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016), the best way to remotely understand and interpret the lived experience of others is by using my own lived experience as a starting point. When I first went through my own personal experience of being adversely impacted by toxic leadership for several years, I felt that I was alone. Over time, I realized that it was extremely likely that many others have experienced this phenomenon as well (van Manen, 2016). As a researcher being able to see the phenomenon through my own eyes brings clarity to what others may have experienced. The way that I felt and thought about my own phenomenological experience, during both positive and adverse actions, decisions, and milestones that led to the phenomenon assisted me in the development of the hermeneutic study.

Additionally, my own reactions, feelings, and thoughts during the phenomenon best helped me identify common themes from others' experiences during the qualitative research study.

However, my own lived experience did run into some issues when it came to the design. Since I utilized my own lived experience as the starting point in this research, there was no way that I truly bracketed myself out of the research (Moustakas, 1994), which caused a dilemma with many different research designs. This is why van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology (2016) was the best method for this research study as I wanted to use my personal lived experience as the starting point of my research. If I experienced the phenomenon myself, there must have been many others who may have experienced something similar (van Manen, 2016).

Research Questions

The following central research and sub questions were the foundation of this research study:

Central Research Question

What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations?

Sub Question One

How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment?

Sub Question Two

How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing?

Sub Question Three

How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment?

Sub Question Four

What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment?

Setting

This study focused on the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Participants were found by using the snowball method, beginning with my own personal network (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participant interviews for the research study took place at a safe location of each participant's choosing. The participants came from all walks of life, schools, small businesses, large corporations, nonprofit organizations, sports teams, hospitals, churches, military units, and local, county, state, and federal government agencies. It was extremely important to ensure that each participant's safety and anonymity were maintained during this research study and where the research participants felt most comfortable to share their own phenomenological experiences. During the interviews, pseudonyms were used for the research participant, other named people, organizations, or any other identifying information.

Toxic leadership, adverse environments, and horrific organizational cultures can arise in any environment and do not rely on a certain demographic. Using participants from a single organizational setting, where they would state their lived experience of an adverse environment and climate, could have resulted in the participants being harassed, treated poorly, or discriminated against even further. Since mental, emotional, and physical safety were paramount in this study, participants were not subjected to unnecessary harm. With focusing on keeping each participant anonymous throughout the research study, using personnel from the same site could have inadvertently subjected them to the previously stated treatment as all of their lived experiences could have created a roadmap for managers or others within the organization to identify them.

Participants

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. There was a requirement for a minimum of 15 participants recruited to be interviewed, with the goal of approximately 12 quality interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in order to fully understand their lived experience (Patton, 2015). The final number of participants could have varied based on availability, and different encounters of the phenomenon that may want to be followed in additional interviews with others. Participants were found through my network and by utilizing the snowball method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as there I was concerned that there were not many people willing to be interviewed because of triggering memories or due to concern of the risk of being identified (Patton, 2015). The snowball method, or sampling, is used when it is hard to find and identify participants that will meet the specific requirements of this study (Patton, 2015). Interviewees were identified based from a survey that was completed and verified that they had experienced this phenomenon.

The goal of the study was to interview participants from different types of organizations, but with the common lived experience of toxic leaders and the ensuing adverse environment and culture. Another important goal of this research study was to be purposeful, which meant that participants must be credible and useful (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 2016). For the best opportunities in understanding the phenomenon, I had to be able to find adults who are able to articulate parts of the entire lived experience. The minimum age was 18 years old with no maximum age. I was not discounting the possible enormous population of those under 18 years old who had experienced this phenomenon firsthand, however, the goal was to keep the study scoped to a particular population.

In all cases, pseudonyms were used for all collected data. The sequence for the names

began with the letter “A” and went through the letter “Z”, regardless of gender. However, the pseudonyms were gender specific or gender-neutral names. Additionally, locations and organizations were generalized to eliminate toxic organizations or managers from identifying any of the research participants by making statements such as: “Alice, who worked as a program manager at a large architecture firm in southern California” or “Bob works as a volunteer at a small nonprofit organization in the New York City area”. Demographic information was only used if relevant to understanding the lived experience as identification was a paramount concern of mine. A proper and safe example was a “Hispanic man was being belittled, excluded from staff functions, and called derogatory names by his manager because of his ethnicity”. If I stated that a “Samoan, named Christine, who currently works as a heart surgeon at a large hospital in northern Maine”, she could be quickly identified and immediately put into an unhealthy or unsafe situation.

An initial survey for data collection of 1,129 individuals: 632 female, 478 male, 3 non-conforming to a gender, 16 chose not to identify their gender, 632 identified as white, 155 as Asian or Pacific Islander, 115 black or African American, 122 Hispanic, 34 American Indian or Alaskan Native, 40 multiple races or ethnicities, and 14 chose not to identify their race or ethnicity, between ages 18-70 was conducted prior to selection of interviewees as outlined in Appendix A. The survey asked questions that potentially identified possible candidates for interviews. The survey, in addition to its data collection, detected if the potential interviewee had encountered the phenomenon and they survey participants were able to provide an email address for the researcher if they wanted to be contacted to be a research participant. Both of these sources of empirical data were analyzed for common themes.

Procedures

There were a number of sequential steps that were necessary to effectively conduct the research study. I requested and obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Liberty University, as shown in Appendix C, prior to searching for any research participants. As part of the searching and selection of research participants, all research participants signed an agreement concerning informed consent before any research was conducted.

Upon IRB approval, I began data collection with a three-step process: electronic surveys, semi-structured interviews, and short written statements by the participants who took part in the semi-structured interviews. I began by sending out a link to an electronic survey using email, social media, and websites to solicit the average person to complete the survey. This survey, reflected in Appendix A, did not have a limit on the number of submissions and the data was collected utilizing SurveyMonkey, a website that specialized in secure surveys. The electronic surveys were completely anonymous, unless someone wanted to submit their contact information if they wanted to volunteer to become a research participant. The contact information was saved by SurveyMonkey in a different file and was not retained in data storage.

There was also an optional block on the surveys, which were sent during step one of the data collection process, for someone to submit their contact information if they wanted to volunteer to become a research participant. I also searched for research participants using my personal and professional networks. Once potential participants were identified, I screened the potential participants by asking them to submit a 200 word or less response to the prompt: What was your lived experience? This response told if the potential participant had truly encountered the phenomenon. During all parts of the research study, participants were repeatedly made aware that participation was completely confidential, voluntary, and that they could remove themselves

at any time. Participants in the research study were consenting adults, at least 18 years old.

After the participants were identified, screened, and signed the informed consent agreement, semi-structured interviews took place and were the second data source for triangulation. The semi-structured interviews were coordinated with each participant's availability, privacy, and comfortability in mind, and then conducted with questions that were tested and based on the literature review. After the interviews were completed, the participants were then asked to submit short statements of who they were before and who they were after the phenomenon, which is a way for the research participants to truly reflect on who they were and how they may have changed through the phenomenon. These statements were the third data source for triangulation and was used to find common themes that were critical to the research. I then commenced with coding, data analysis, and determined if further research was needed to be conducted.

The Researcher's Role

I have encountered toxic leaders, environments, and organizational cultures on several occasions throughout my life. While I have experienced the phenomenon firsthand, it was only through a singular lens. Additional information through different lenses provided an opportunity for exponentially better in-depth research, analysis, and reporting the essence of the lived experience in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Since I was the human instrument pursuing the lived experience of others, my own reactions, feelings, and thoughts during the phenomenon did help me identify common themes from the participants' experiences during this research study. There was no realistic way that I could truly bracket myself out of the research (Moustakas, 1994), which is why I chose van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology

(2016) as the research design. I limited my bias and assumptions by obtaining data saturation and letting the descriptions from the research participants guide the findings.

Since I utilized the snowball method, where I found participants through my network (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I did have a limited relationship with some of the research participants. As the snowball method continued, I did not have an established relationship with any of the research participants, as the only link between me and the research participants was this research study. Additionally, I had no role or relationship in the setting or research site. The sites for the study varied as it depended on the location of the research participants. Locations for the research participant interviews varied as the participants came from various occupations and the interviews were conducted where it was convenient, comfortable, and safe for the participant.

Data Collection

The participants of the study shared their lived experience and perceptions for the researcher through several data collection methods. Data triangulation “involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260) and this data collection strategy was utilized for this research study. The sequence of the study, which was the three pillars of data triangulation, began with a survey, then semi-structured interviews, and finally statements from the participants of who they were before and who they were after the phenomenon. This sequence was specifically selected as “when qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260). The validity of this research study was extremely important to me, the research participants, and those who will read the study.

I began by sending links to secured surveys through my personal and professional networks: Personal contact list, LinkedIn, and Facebook. I evaluated survey responses and if an individual provided contact information, and if I identify that they would fit the requirements to become a research participant, I then contacted them, using the information the research participant provided, to coordinate a participant interview. Finally, I asked each participant to submit a statement consisting of a description of what the participant was like before their experience in a toxic environment and a description of what they were like after their experience in a toxic environment. Collected statements were used to identify common themes or descriptive terms that were identified by the participants. No other additional data from the participants was requested. Before any data collection took place, IRB approval was obtained. However, once IRB approval was obtained, but before data collection takes place, a pilot study was conducted to validate face and content validity. All of the survey and interview questions were assessed to be relevant and useful to the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Surveys

Surveys are one of the instruments that can be utilized in any phenomenological study as they provide the step in a “series of representations that will build patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organizing the data inductively into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). This survey was created on SurveyMonkey. The data collection survey questions are located in Appendix A. Data collection began with emailing or messaging links to secured surveys through my personal contacts, LinkedIn, and Facebook, which were people that I personally know, and by people that are identified through the snowball method. I used emails and text messages, located in Appendix B, to send out a link to the secured survey and post the link on LinkedIn and

Facebook. The survey was completed by respondents at their convenience, remotely, and only if they chose to. The survey was open until the day before data analysis began. The survey questions specifically generated data to address the Central Research Question: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations; Sub-Question 1: How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment; and Sub-Question 2: How did each person respond to the toxic environment, was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing?

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews of the research study participants were the most important aspect of the data collection in this qualitative phenomenological study. While structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interview methods were all considered, semi-structured interviews were best suited to fully “describe the meaning of the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 131). Structured interviews are “closed, forced-choice responses” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 163), which can “reduce the extent to which individual differences and circumstances can be queried” (Patton, 2015, p. 441). Conversely, an unstructured interview “involves an informal, interactive process, and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114), which was not the best method to help me find the essence of the lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

When the participants identified a potential interview location, I highly encouraged them to select a location that was most comfortable, quiet, safe, and as far away from any toxic environment that they would normally encounter. I wanted to hear the in-depth story from the participant and not just read it from their writings as it could possibly inadvertently change the focus of the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and

associated social distancing recommendations and rules, all interviews were conducted telephonically or by a secure video conference service.

Initial in-depth interviews were conducted by asking the interviewees questions from a guided list that is grounded in literature. Additional follow-on interviews to gain additional insight about the essence of their lived experience took place to ensure the full picture was provided. A holistic approach to interviewing then commenced. The interview process took about 45 minutes, but some took longer depending on how elaborate participant responses were. I employed the use of an audio recorder, along with my cell phone as my backup, for the interviews and uploaded all recorded data to an external drive that was used only for this purpose as to maintain data integrity, confidentiality, and availability. I had the interviews transcribed by a professional service. All devices were tested prior to each interview to ensure the devices were charged and operational. Prior to commencing the interview, I stated, "Begin interview, my name, date, time, location, and participant pseudonym". I also recorded the following statement before each interview, "As a reminder, please use pseudonyms for all people involved, as well as identifying organizational information", however, as I transcribe the interviews, if identifying information is accidentally provided, I will scrub this information. At the conclusion of the interview, I will record the completion time and state "End interview, my name, date, time, location, and participant pseudonym." If breaks were needed during the interview process made a record in the written notes as well as the recorded portion of the interview. If a break was necessary, I stated, "Break in interview, my name, date, time, location, and participant pseudonym" and when we were able to resume the interview I stated, "Resuming interview, my name, date, time, location, and participant pseudonym". This was done to justify time length or digital file size variances. Any notes taken during the interview were transcribed and attached to

the audio file on the external drive. Each participant interview and transcription notes were kept in individual digital files and file names correlated with each participant's assigned pseudonym.

The following open-ended interview questions were used:

1. Please tell me about where you grew up and your youth. CRQ
2. Please tell me about your life after you became an adult. CRQ
3. Please tell me about your current worldview. CRQ
4. Please tell me your current family and living situation. CRQ
5. What was your level of education at the time of the phenomenon? CRQ
6. How old were you at the time of the phenomenon? CRQ
7. Please share with me your family and living situation at the time of the phenomenon.
CRQ
8. What was your position in the organization at time of phenomenon? CRQ
9. What role did you play in the organization? CRQ
10. What was your lived experience? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
11. What made your lived experience so significant? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
12. What are the differences are between toxic leadership and mismanagement? CRQ
13. When you work at the lowest level, what is the most effective way to address a toxic environment or organizational culture? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
14. How important is culture to you when deciding whether to be part of an organization?
CRQ and SQ1
15. If the majority of leaders contribute to the toxic environment, at what point do you identify leaving the organization as positive change is most likely not possible? CRQ.
SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4

16. What do you believe is the catalyst for toxic leadership? CRQ
17. Why do you think that most leaders do not realize that they are toxic? CRQ
18. If a leader does come to the realization that they are toxic, what do you imagine goes through their minds? CRQ
19. What are specific red flags have you encountered and when evaluating workplace culture? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
20. What are the avenues for organizational members to voice concerns within current labor laws and protections? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
21. What would you have done differently if you were to go back to that lived experience? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
22. If you were a parent, mentor, or friend of someone going through the identical experience, what guidance or direction would you provide? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4
23. What comment or story that you haven't already spoken about would you like to add? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, and SQ4

Questions one through four were background questions which were designed to better understand each participant's background, from the beginning, as it helped to understand their reaction to the phenomenon and also helped with creating a two way dialogue with the research participant (van Manen, 2016). These questions also eased the research participant into the interview as they were eventually asked very personal questions which may have returned their thoughts or emotions to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). While it was not the intent of the research study, there may have been correlations between participants' backgrounds and their

lived experience, which may explain their specific responses and the data collected could possibly be utilized in future studies.

Questions five through nine set the stage for where the adversely impacted participants were in their lives at the onset of the phenomenon. While these questions were not about the phenomenon itself, this line of interview questions gently led the participant to the lived experience itself. It was extremely important to know what tools, support, and distractions that the participant was dealing with at the time of the phenomenon. While these were not indicators of how the participant responded to the phenomenon, it was interesting to see the similarities based on these questions during the coding process.

Questions 10 and 11 were about the lived experience itself and lent each participant an opportunity to voice their experience as they were most likely previously denied the opportunity at their organization (Boddy, 2017) or their associates from that organization. The extremely personal questions for each research participant led the participants to relive the original physical, emotional, and mental symptoms, such as: Increased levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive problems, high blood pressure, digestion issues, headaches and migraines, immune system disorders, absenteeism, exhaustion, feelings of hopelessness, nervous habits, shame, embarrassment, suicidal ideations, and increased use of drugs, tobacco products, alcohol, and abuse of prescription medications (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Kuoppala et al., 2008; Roter, 2011). This is why it was imperative that each participant fully understood that I wanted to keep them feeling safe and that they could terminate the interview at any time as I did not want them to be harmed any further. Additionally, if I saw that the participant being mentally, emotionally, or physically impacted by the interview, I did stop the interview immediately.

Questions 12 through 20 were about the perceptions of the participants and their views when it comes to leadership, organizational environment and culture, toxicity, and where to obtain support. This line of questions was extremely important as it contributed to the understanding of their worldview and professional belief system (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016), whether it was before or after the phenomenon. These questions fed into better understanding each research participant's perceptions, responses, reactions, and advising others of their lived experience.

Questions 21 and 22 were solely focused on post phenomenon. The participant was sharing what he or she could have changed, done differently, and altering other things within their control. Some participants indicated that those changes or realizations during the phenomenon may have transformed the situation itself, made it more bearable, or even worse for the participant. While there was no correct answer for these or any of the other interview questions, it led to understanding the essence of the lived experience of each participant.

The final question was to ensure that there is nothing that the participant may have forgotten about, did not fully explain a situation, or wanted to clarify a response. Answering some of the later questions may have triggered thoughts about a situation that may have occurred during the lived experience that was of importance in the participants' minds. Additionally, this question served as an opportunity to further link some of the responses to several other questions for an overall better understanding of the lived experience.

The semi-structured interviews specifically generated data to address the Central Research Question: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations; Sub-Question 1: How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment; Sub Question 2: How did each person respond to the toxic

environment, was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing; Sub-Question 3: How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment; and Sub-Question 4: What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment?

Written Statements

When an individual writes about an experience, it serves as a reflection of the phenomenon itself (van Manen, 2016), may provide more clarity of how the phenomenon unfolded (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and can ultimately provide the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) that may not have otherwise been conveyed in a discussion or interview. After participants completed surveys and semi-structured interviews, I requested by email a brief statement of what the participant was like prior to their experience. A description of the participant's mood, character, social life, sleep habits, and professional satisfaction provided a baseline for who they were before the phenomenon, what their "typical behavior" was on a daily basis. In the body of the email, I specifically stated: "Before the phenomenon took place, please describe your mood, character, social life, sleep habits, and professional satisfaction. There is no minimum or maximum length or time that this exercise needs to be, but 300-500 words or about 5-10 minutes of writing should be able to effectively convey what your life was like before the phenomenon". I then asked them to provide the response within three days of receiving the email.

After I received the initial written statement, I then sent another email to each participant requesting another statement describing these same aspects, however this time the description should include how their lives were during or after the phenomenon. In the body of the email, I specifically stated: "During the phenomenon, please describe your mood, character, social life,

sleep habits, and professional satisfaction. There is no minimum or maximum length or time that this exercise needs to be, but 300-500 words or about 5-10 minutes of writing should be able to effectively convey what your life was like before the phenomenon”. I then asked the participant to provide the response within three days of receiving the email.

I requested the statements to be written in this order to allow the survey and interview to evoke memories or feelings that might otherwise have been forgotten or repressed. All statements were digitally stored in each participant file and included the participant pseudonym, date, and title, “Self-description Prior to Experience” and “Self-description During the Experience”.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Each piece of data was part of a larger puzzle and eventually fit into a theme throughout the analysis. Theme analysis is the process of identifying the “themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (van Manen, 2016, p. 78).

Whether it was a journal article, response to an interview or survey question, or a written statement, every piece of data was extremely important and sought after (van Manen, 2016). Just like van Manen (2016), the procedures used during this data analysis were similar to other researchers such as Mjørud, Engedal, Røsvik, and Kirkevold (2017) and Lindseth and Norberg (2004), where themes from all of the collected information ultimately resulted in clearly understanding the lived experience (Mjørud et al., 2017) of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Utilizing my own experiences and the gathered data for this research study, I

was able to consider and analyze the data properly, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data.

During the interviews I took notes, specifically listening for tone in responses to questions 10 and 11. I notated any pauses in difficulty verbalizing the experience, emotional responses such as anger, excitement or sadness, and use of extreme vocabulary that is used to describe feelings (shame, hate, isolation, lonely, losing will to live). Repetition in use of vocabulary provided patterns of participant self-worth that could lead to common themes in multiple participants. I took notes on which questions participants have difficulty responding to and why. Certain questions evoked memories that were too difficult to re-live, this allowed me to determine if multiple participants experienced similar responses related to specific experiences. Common language or vocabulary were color coded in the transcripts and changes in tone were numbered (1 = normal speech, 10 = labored and difficulty completing thought). Member checking, was constant throughout the research study, demanding that every interview transcription was sent back to the participant to ensure accuracy.

A thematic data analysis, where the researcher strives to meet all of the trustworthiness data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), became the successful foundation to finding the essence of the lived experience and generated a rich, thick, and deep description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Identifying themes in surveys, interviews including the nonverbal cues, and statements began to focus the research and provided a way forward for the coding process. Coding, which is the process of analyzing “qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 156), triggered insightful discovery, created structures of the lived experience, and ultimately captured the essence of the lived experience

(van Manen, 2016). I used axial coding to help me refine, align, and categorize themes by sifting through data to identify relationships between the codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; M. Williams & Moser, 2019). I then used selective coding to select the main thematic category and aligned it to the other selectively coded categories (M. Williams & Moser, 2019). Additionally, memoing, which is the act of “recording reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data” (Groenewald, 2008, p. 506), was an extremely important process during all data collection phases and during coding to ensure that all data was properly organized for themes that were identified throughout the research.

Identifying and relating categories and themes from the interviews, surveys, and submitted documentation by the participants was a priority for this research. Specific information about the experience of each interviewee was analyzed. Before the data was analyzed, it was first properly organized, memoed, and coded by a process. NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software developed for research, enabled me to fully understand the interweaving of the themes from different sources and therefore resulted in me better communicating the themes of the phenomenon through the dissertation. These themes were found by data triangulation of the survey, semi-structured interviews, and statements from the participants of who they were before and who they were after the phenomenon. Creating a common point of view of those impacted by the phenomenon and the aftereffects was key to success. This resulted in a full account of the interviewees’ perceptions of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, which comprises of “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 219), was one of the guiding principles of this research study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that any qualitative research “study is for naught

if its trustworthiness is questionable” (p. 287). Trustworthiness is incredibly important as the results must be valid and reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that there are inherent flaws in the inductive nature of qualitative research. I overcame this by carrying out a trustworthy research study with structural corroboration, member checking, proper coding, and analysis methods.

Credibility

Credibility of a study, which is extremely crucial in any research study, is determined when “researchers or readers are confronted with the experience, they can recognize it” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). While I was extremely knowledgeable of this phenomenon and the adverse impacts from it, I did not insert my own beliefs, thoughts, and views in lieu of the participants. Member checking, which “allows the researcher to establish the fit between respondents’ views and the researcher’s representation of them” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 11), was constant throughout the research study. Every interview transcription was sent back to the participants to ensure accuracy. Additionally, I utilized triangulation where I intertwined multiple data sources to ensure the most credible results in a qualitative, not quantitative, manner and did not rely on one data source for interpreting results. However, the data analyzed in this study was subject to my biases in this qualitative, phenomenological study (van Manen, 2016) but this same bias helped me in understanding the participants’ experiences (Schwandt, 2015).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability of this research study was paramount and I must “ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). I honestly and logically conducted research, analysis, and reporting of all data, even if it conflicted with my own lived experience or beliefs. I established confirmability, where my “interpretations and

findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). I kept a detailed record and audit trail to increase confirmability. I also worked through my dissertation chair and committee to keep my study dependable and confirm it.

Transferability

Transferability in a qualitative study refers to “Describing not just the behaviour and experiences, but their context as well, so that the behaviour and experiences become meaningful to an outsider” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). Any reader or participant of this research study was able to have confidence in me as the researcher, reviewed literature, collected data, and the reporting of the results. Generating a rich, deep, and thick description, “so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3), was paramount. An in depth description of the participants and interpretation of the data and research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was created. Most readers and other researchers will be able to apply this information to almost any setting.

Ethical Considerations

If a participant is identified, this can result in the participant being treated poorly, harassed, retaliated against, or other administrative action can be taken against the participant. I practiced and enforced full anonymity of each participant along with desensitizing any information provided that could potentially identify the individual. All information concerning any organization’s identity was replaced by pseudo information to prohibit any adverse action against the organization that the participant belongs to. All personally identifiable information remains secure in my domicile and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the research study. All electronic data, to include any personally identifiable information, is

maintained on an external storage device and will be kept in a locked physical area that nobody except the researcher has access to.

Each participant was treated with dignity and respect during the entire research study. Each individual was required to provide consent before any participation in the research study and was able to withdraw their consent at any time for any reason. Participation in the research study was completely voluntary and nobody was forced or coerced into participating. There was no data collection completed and no solicitation of research participants until I received IRB approval to begin.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Through creating, reviewing, and reporting the design, the research questions, discussing the site, participants, procedures, my role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, this study was extremely successful and will be easily understood by most readers and available for replication of the study itself.

In the following chapter, I will show the findings of my data analysis. In Chapter Five, I will discuss the findings and the implications through literature and theory, outline the study's delimitations and limitations, and provide my interpretation of the results. I will also provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the data analysis. This chapter describes the research participants and presents all findings from the data collected during the research study and include an individual description of every participant including pseudonym used, age, gender, ethnicity, relationship status, education, employee level, and research participant responses during the data collection process. To better understand this phenomenon, the following central and sub questions were used to guide this study:

Central Research Question: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations?

Sub Question 1: How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment?

Sub Question 2: How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing?

Sub Question 3: How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment?

Sub Question 4: What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment?

This chapter allowed the researcher to understand the essence of the lived experience by hearing the research participants' rich, thick, and deep description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Thematic data analysis, where the researcher strives to meet all of the trustworthiness data (Nowell et al., 2017), was successfully used to analyze the data for

themes during each data collection method: Surveys, semi-structured interviews, and written statements from the participants of who they were before and who they were after the phenomenon. This chapter will conclude with a description of a common point of view and perceptions of those impacted by the phenomenon, along with any short- and long-term impacts.

Participants

There were 1,138 people who attempted to participate in the research study. Nine people were ineligible due to not being at least 18 years old. This resulted in 1,129 people participating in the online survey. There were 61 people who volunteered to participate in the other data collection methods. I contacted 50 potential research participants to complete the consent form, where 40 people completed the consent form. Additionally, 6 potential research participants opted out of being interviewed before the interview took place due to not wanting to relive the experience. This resulted in 31 research participants being interviewed. Two research participants stopped during the interview because they could not continue due to reliving the experience. As seen in Table 1: 29 research participants completed the semi-structured interviews and proceeded to the written statement stage of the data collection; 29 completed the first written statement of who they were before experiencing the phenomenon; and 27 research participants completed the second written statement of who they were after experiencing the phenomenon. In addition, 17 research participants completed the member checking process of the transcript from their semi-structured interview.

Table 1

Research Participant Data Collection

Pseudonym	Survey	Interview	Written Statements
Angela	X	X	2
Beth	X	X	2
Charles	X	X	2
Dawn	X	X	2
Emma	X	X	2
Faith	X	X	2
Gail	X	X	2
Hope	X	X	1
Ian	X	X	2
Jenny	X	X	2
Kathy	X	X	2
Luke	X	X	2
Maria	X	X	2
Nancy	X	X	1
Oscar	X	X	2
Paul	X	X	2
Quest	X	X	2
Rita	X	X	2
Sam	X	X	2
Tim	X	X	2

Ulysses	X	X	2
Victor	X	X	2
Wendy	X	X	2
Xavier	X	X	2
Yvette	X	X	2
Zack	X	X	2
Alex	X	X	2
Brett	X	X	2
Chris	X	X	2

Due to the difficulty of finding and identifying research participants that met the specific requirements of this study, the snowball method was used for this study (Patton, 2015). I sent an email (Appendix B) and posted on LinkedIn and Facebook requesting that people take the anonymous survey. While my network was not large, I can only make the assumption that so many people completed the anonymous survey due to people sharing and forwarding my initial request.

To ensure there is a deep, rich, and thick description of each research study participant, I created descriptions of each of the research study participants. These descriptions will provide an introduction and will help each reader understand who each participant was. While pseudonyms were used and any identifiable information was removed, the following descriptions are reflective of who each participant is now and during their lived experience.

Angela

Angela was a white female, was married, and approximately 48 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Angela had her associate's and was an executive level volunteer for a United States based nonprofit organization in England. Angela is close with her family, had a great upbringing, and was enjoying living and working in a foreign country. Angela lived her life with an extremely positive attitude, focused on being nice to others, and propping others up.

Angela had a supervisor that was the most destructive force that she ever encountered. While initial encounters with the supervisor were benign, as soon as the supervisor began disliking ideas, opinions, knowledge, or things that Angela would say, the supervisor turned on her. The supervisor did not only stop speaking with Angela, but she also stopped speaking with everyone, regardless of position. Then when the supervisor did engage with someone, it was with yelling and complete distrust. The toxic culture that this supervisor was creating was impacting the organization's mission, goals, objectives, people, and was bringing down the morale. When the supervisor could not easily get what she wanted, she started manipulating the employees by not allowing them to talk to each other. Angela and her peers had to meet privately, in an off-campus location so they could seek advice and support from each other. The supervisor just wanted personnel to work in silos and not collaborate with each other. Angela began losing her self-confidence, did not feel valued or appreciated, and her initiative began to erode. While she initially tried brushing her supervisor's toxicity and behavior off, she could not stop how much it was impacting her and the team. Angela would frequently speak to her husband about the abusive situation and would privately yell and cry. Angela's main goal began

to be to avoid all interaction possible with the supervisor. Angela fully withdrew from others within and outside of the organization.

While over a decade has passed since Angela's lived experience, she still refuses to look at her diary from that time as it stirs up horrible memories and feelings. Angela is still disappointed in the organization's senior leaders selecting this supervisor and standing by her through all of the toxicity she created, and even defended the supervisor when personnel filed formal complaints. Angela has still not fully regained her confidence and to this day cannot believe how destructive one person can be and also that an organization and others would openly support the abuse.

Beth

Beth was a white female, married with an adult child, and approximately 51 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Beth had a master's degree and was an executive level volunteer for a United States based nonprofit organization in Germany. She is close with her family, had a happy upbringing, and had a very successful career early on, to include leading several multimillion dollar companies. Beth was a very positive person, optimistic, never had a "bad day at the office", and believed that "storms may come but leaders and the team will always weather them together" and if she "just worked hard, did what was expected of her, she could somehow guarantee a great outcome for all".

Beth had supervisor that was extremely corrosive and counter to mission goals and organizational culture. This toxic supervisor was not truthful to anyone and had her own agenda that was only known by her. The supervisor was extremely overbearing, never truthful, and continuously berated subordinates, regardless of position or experience. The supervisor created such a toxic culture and extreme bullying behavior that Beth received many calls from staff

members that would be crying and volunteers that felt berated by this supervisor. If a volunteer would step out of line, this supervisor would ensure that the volunteer would be unable to work with the organization. If it was an employee who did something the supervisor did not agree with, she would get them transferred, write a bad review, or create a space that was uncomfortable for them. Beth would receive phone calls from volunteers or employees that locked themselves in closets because the culture and environment were so bad within the organization, they no longer felt safe in their offices or workspaces. When the supervisor was not berating, belittling, chastising, demeaning, diminishing, and castigating employees and volunteers, she was nowhere to be found and Beth and others had to carry out the supervisor's duties. Because of this severely hostile and toxic culture and environment, Beth stopped being herself, internalized everything that was happening to her and others, was continuously doubting herself, was on a continuous emotional roller coaster, became withdrawn, physically sick with stomach pains, stopped eating, not sleeping, and when she was sleeping, would just talk in her sleep for more than seven months. Beth was not the only target and she also would also continuously worry about others who were suffering from the same bully's actions. Beth could not handle how bad the toxicity was making her feel and she decided to leave her position and organization. On the day that happened, Beth's husband explained how relieved he was about the decision to leave as he did not like the how Beth had changed at what the toxicity was doing to her over the previous two years.

While a few years have passed since Beth's lived experience, the situation did not end when she resigned her position. It still took Beth over three weeks to eat a full meal. For almost six months after Beth's departure, employees and volunteers in the organization would call Beth, while crying, to say how they could not handle the toxicity and the supervisor anymore. Beth is

now cynical about many things and continues to doubt herself. While Beth is back volunteering at the organization at the national headquarters and in a senior position to that supervisor, Beth still gets sick to her stomach every time she sees this supervisor's name in an email or someone mentions her name.

Charles

Charles was a white male, married with two children, and approximately 48 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Charles had obtained a master's degree and was working as the team leader for a project management organization that focused specifically on relocation of manufacturing and engineering across the globe for the U.S. Military, where he was a member for almost 20 years. Charles is close with his family, had a great upbringing, and had a successful career in the military. Charles was self-confident and excited to work with incredibly good people.

Charles' introduction to his vice president was met with the Charles' new manager complaining about the way the vice president treated people, his rudeness, use of vulgar language, bullying tactics, and bursts of anger for minor issues. The vice president directly impacted Charles' entire organization and controlled their budget. Whenever Charles' team interfaced with the vice president's team, they were very hesitant to talk to him or bring up issues to him. The vice president's subordinates would always not accept any work, commit to any tasks or projects, or try to solve any issues as the vice president would come down on them by yelling, bullying, or outright firing subordinates. Other teams were forced to pull the weight of the vice president's team, even if the work was outside of their education or experience, as military personnel's health, safety, and wellbeing were at risk. This toxic environment caused a lot of stress and pain within Charles and others' project teams, groups were not truthful with

each other, would hide from the vice president or other teams, teams losing focus on mission, lack of communication, and an extremely frustrating work environment for all involved. Charles originally tried shielding his team from the vice president's antics, which was met with severe resistance by the vice president with frequent public berating and bullying. Charles was once self-confident and excited to be employed by a good organization and was fortunate to work with incredibly good people, which quickly soured.

Charles' excitement for his job declined and he developed anxiety and reluctance towards the job. His personal life started to become impacted by the toxic vice president and organizational culture. Charles did not feel safe while at work. Charles' was extremely irritable every day after work and he had nowhere to relieve his stress. His quality of sleep was greatly reduced, his mood changed, and he became more negative and resentful towards the organization's leadership and its decisions. Since Charles voluntarily left the organization, he feels that he is much happier, sleeping better, and his outlook on life has improved but not to where he was before the toxic manager and culture.

Dawn

Dawn was a Hispanic female, was single, and approximately 20 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Dawn completed secondary school, was progressing through her bachelor's degree, and working as a server at a small family restaurant in California for more than a year. Dawn is extremely close with her family, had a very happy upbringing, and was trying to progress through her new life as an adult. Dawn was an incredibly optimistic person that aspired to see the best in everyone, gave each person the benefit of the doubt, hoped for the same in return, was very positive, and caring.

Dawn had multiple and rotating supervisors who would always try to take advantage of all of the servers and staff. There was no accountability of these supervisors. The first supervisor first began scheduling Dawn on days that she already told the manager that she could not work due to conflicts with school or having to take her father to treatments for his cancer. Dawn was available at all other times and would pick up multiple additional shifts, most with only 30 minutes notice, every week. Another supervisor would frequently yell at the servers and put them down in public and even in front of customers. The final supervisor would not be available or pull his weight and the servers would have to perform his duties for him. But when the supervisor would see things that the servers did in his absence or lack of direction, or when customers would complain that there was no manager to speak to, he would quickly blow up and would blame things on other people, especially Dawn. The servers and other staff began speaking to one another about how toxic the culture was getting at the restaurant and how there was no accountability of any of the supervisors. If one of the supervisors did not like someone, all of the supervisors would target the staff member. However, employees who worked the most shifts were the biggest targets of the supervisors. While the supervisors could rely on them to get things done, Dawn and others who worked the most shifts became the familiar targets. On a big restaurant day, Dawn and many others were scheduled to serve. Upon arrival, the restaurant was not busy, so the supervisors sent all the extra staff home except Dawn. That night, Dawn served her own tables, helped others with their tables, helped the bussers, and even worked as a host due to how busy it was. The entire night, multiple supervisors and even the restaurant owner would scream at Dawn and others because they were stressed at how busy it was. At the end of the evening, after everyone's hard work, the supervisors were withholding tips because "people were taking money from the register". When Dawn asked if she could leave for the night, as she was

only supposed to be there for two hours, she was screamed at in front of the staff and customers that she had stolen money from the drawer, and then turned around and ignored Dawn. Dawn eventually left with no tips or even pay for the night. Dawn arrived for her shift the next day and the supervisors would just ignore her, other than to yell or scream at her in front of other staff and customers. This treatment continued for several weeks, where Dawn would go home in tears, just like nights she was accused of stealing. Her mental health was dwindling, she was constantly stressed at home and school because of the toxicity and abuse at her work, and it was impacting her she would fear going to work.

Dawn asked for a leave of absence due to the abusive treatment, and they begrudgingly granted it. Towards the end of her leave of absence, COVID-19 took hold and the restaurant closed for some time. While it has been over a year since her lived experience, Dawn has no intention of returning to the restaurant as she is still adversely impacted by the toxic culture, abuse, and overall negativity that lives at the restaurant.

Emma

Emma was a white female, had a partner, and approximately 20 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Emma completed secondary school and was working as a library assistant in the library system in Queensland, Australia for more than a year. Emma is close with her family, had a very happy upbringing, and was trying to progress through her new life as an adult. Emma was a very positive person, extremely happy, high achiever, and enjoyed working with others.

Emma had a supervisor that harbored and protected favorites and consistently denigrated and dismissed everyone else. This toxic supervisor was solely looking out for herself and would shape situations her way and use nepotism to meet her own needs and benefit. The supervisor

created such a toxic culture that caused extreme bullying behavior of inexperienced staff while older staff were driven to silent suffering and disengagement. Secret meetings were held with only select favorites, but the entire staff were expected to carry out assignments that were discussed in these meetings. Emma saw that poor performing employees were protected, praised, provided education and conference opportunities, and promoted as they aligned themselves with the toxic supervisor. There was no accountability of the supervisor and everyone else was the problem when something wrong happened. Emma became a target because of her happy personality and a favored colleague did not get along with her. Because of the increased toxicity, bullying, abuse, and bold behavior by the supervisor and others, Emma began to feel unsafe, was full of fear, and afraid of what would happen daily. There were a few coworkers, who were also suffering as much or more than Emma was, that she could speak to about what she was going through. However, Emma began internalizing the toxicity, developed a panic disorder, did not sleep well, would have frequent anxiety attacks, heart palpitations, breathing problems, fainting, and skyrocketing blood pressure and other health issues. Emma was extremely unhappy, felt powerless at work and home, completely withdrawn, isolated, lost her joy of work, an extreme change in personality, impacted her personal and familial relationships, and felt stuck in the position because she could not afford to leave.

While many decades have passed since Emma's lived experience, she still has to be mindful of panic attacks. Emma still has trouble sleeping, difficulty relaxing, and was so withdrawn for many years to the point that the mere thought of an upcoming social event triggered a panic response. Emma is slowly beginning to not be afraid of work but still has massive mental, physical, and emotional health issues that will remain with her the rest of her life. Emma is truly a shell of her former self.

Faith

Faith was a white female, was single, and approximately 37 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Faith had a master's degree and was as an executive officer in a mid-sized organization in the U.S. Military, in North Carolina. Faith had good upbringing and was progressing well through her career in the military. Faith was enjoying her career, proud of my service, loved being a part of something bigger than herself, and was in the best physical shape of her life.

Faith had a supervisor that immediately created a toxic culture and unsafe environment, the moment she came to the organization. The supervisor truly only cared for herself and was only there to advance herself. The supervisor publicly degraded, berated, and was extremely disrespectful of Marines and officers of all ranks, was verbally abusive, did not treat others with dignity or respect, would purposefully hurt others, narcissistic, and used all of the tools available to benefit herself and her own vision, for career advancement. This supervisor's mission and vision were contrary to the ethos of the Marine Corps and only served one person. The supervisor purposefully used career ending punishment against anyone who did not comply and openly move forward with the vision, even though the vision was in violation with the letter and spirit of Navy and Marine Corps policy or federal law. The supervisor was not only adversely impacting almost everyone's careers, but their wellbeing as well. Marines and officers of all ranks were constantly being diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or physical illnesses. But most Marines and officers were put into two camps, those being abused and the toxic followers. The few toxic followers there were became extremely successful while everyone else suffered. There were even times when toxic followers assaulted others, and the result each time was that the toxic follower was praised, and the victim was reprimanded. Because of Faith's beliefs, morals,

values, and ethics, she stood up to the abusive supervisor at all times. This resulted in Faith becoming one of the primary targets of the supervisor. However, Faith felt that she needed to do everything possible to protect others. Because of the increased toxicity, bullying, and abuse from the supervisor, Faith became depressed, frustrated, felt helpless, hopeless, stopped regularly exercising, and tried to get herself and all other members out of the organization so they would not be further adversely impacted. Faith eventually found an investigative organization who would listen to what was happening. This organization investigated and its findings resulted in the supervisor finally being removed.

While over seven years have passed since Faith's lived experience, she still struggles with all of the damage that was caused to herself and others. It took Faith about two years to finally come to terms with her helplessness in that toxic culture and the real impact of abusive people and organizations. While Faith claims that she has recently gone back to living the same positive life that she was prior to the lived experience, she is extremely sensitive to abuse, toxicity, and unsafe people and conditions. Faith's stomach hurts every time she thinks about the supervisor. Faith still struggles that she should have done more or something earlier to protect others and herself, even though she admits that there was not anything else she did not already try.

Gail

Gail was a white female, single, taking care of her little brother, and approximately 17 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Gail was completing secondary school and was working as a cashier at a restaurant in a small town in Florida for more than a year. Gail came from an extremely fractured family, where her father left to live with his other family when she was 10 and did not see him again. Gail's mother was absent most of the

time after that and would verbally abuse her when she would appear. Gail's paternal grandmother also verbally and physically abused her as well. Gail was just trying to make it through high school and care for her brother.

Gail had a male supervisor who would prey on the young female employees. He would have inappropriate relationships with the employees, but Gail refused. One evening, the much older supervisor asked Gail to stay late at work. When the store closed that evening, the supervisor asked Gail for a ride home. While Gail was driving the supervisor home, she was physically assaulted, sexually assaulted, and then raped. The supervisor then left Gail in an extremely rural area to deal with what happened on her own. Gail then had to go to work the next day as her income provided for the basic needs for not only herself, but her brother as well. When Gail arrived at work, she began to cry uncontrollably as she was previously throughout the day. When the supervisor arrived on site, he repeatedly told Gail to stop crying and it was not a big deal. Over the next few weeks, the supervisor told all of the employees that Gail attacked him that night. Because of how popular the supervisor was and the inappropriate relationships that he was having with the employees, especially with the female employees that were younger than 18 years old, the employees began bullying and harassing her. Gail had to endure the extremely toxic environment, culture, extreme bullying, and harassment for four months until the day she graduated from high school, when she left her job and the county. Because of the initial event and subsequent treatment, bullying, and harassment by the supervisor and peers, Gail was going through severe depression; completely withdrawn; felt dirty, cursed, stupid, deserved to be unloved, and ugly; repeatedly had thoughts of suicide; was constantly ill, began drinking in excess; partying; was extremely miserable; in denial; and does not recall much of what happened for the four months following the assault and rape. However, because of the mental, emotional,

and physical trauma that Gail endured because of this, she had felt as though she had no self-worth and was invisible to everyone, Gail was targeted several times by male supervisors at other jobs, one of which was successful in sexually assaulting and raping her.

While many decades have passed since Gail's lived experience, she still suffers every day. Gail still cannot work under male supervisors without shutting down and getting physically ill. Gail began embracing hazardous eating disorders so she could become as ugly on the outside to match what she perceived on the inside. Gail consistently makes bad choices in relationships, both personal and professional and has had thoughts of suicide. While she eventually got married and had two children, her marriage suffers daily because of the constant thoughts of what happened, and she feels that she is too dirty and stupid to be a worthwhile partner to her husband. When Gail's memories are too painful, she becomes so ill that it results in periodic hospital stays. Gail still has no trust in anyone and feels that everyone is out to get her. Gail is always on high alert when she returns to Florida. Gail is also in a destructive cycle of where she will begin therapy and will abruptly quit when it comes time to talk about the trauma. Gail still has periodic anxiety attacks while driving because she believes that the supervisor is in the car next to her or with her and can still smell him. Gail is truly an empty shell of her former self and will most likely continue dealing with the fallout of what this supervisor did to her until the day she dies.

Hope

Hope was a white female, married with one child still at home and one adult child, and approximately 55 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Hope completed some college and was working as a regional director for a United States based nonprofit organization in Italy. Hope had a tough upbringing with discipline, but she does not

consider it a bad upbringing. Hope enjoyed raising her children, volunteering, and making a positive impact on the community that she served. Hope was focused on providing value to others, build quality relationships, and be grateful for everything that she experienced in life.

Hope had a supervisor that did not value her personnel and did not hold herself accountable. It all started when Hope was preparing to deploy to a country in the Middle East, when her supervisor hired a replacement for Hope. Hope had no input in the selection or hiring process, and did not know that this person was replacing her. During the deployment, the organization has a strict rule for the deployed personnel to be in contact with their home office, so they stay focused on their mission while deployed and not distracted by home office issues. However, Hope's supervisor instructed the replacement and other managers to call Hope when they needed to, which became frequent. Hope's deployment was cut short due to COVID-19 and she was returned to the United States as there was a national lockdown in Italy at the time. After the national lockdown ended in Italy, Hope was eager to return to her family and work. However, Hope was told that it was not possible without any further information or clarification. Hope continued to press to go home, back on the deployment, or if she could just work from where she was in the United States and she was repeated told no, with no further information. Hope was eventually told that if she returned to Italy to be with her family, she would have to take personal time off and then be fired. A few weeks later, the person who backfilled Hope contacted her and said that she was resigning, and that Hope was back in charge. During the turnover process, Hope learned that her replacement was mistreating many of the managers, support staff, and volunteers. Soon after that, when Hope was returning to Italy, Hope was being blamed by her supervisor that Hope was the person who hired her own replacement and empowered the replacement to treat everyone so horribly. Hope's supervisor continued to blame

hope for everything that happened because of the replacement, to include recent formal grievances that were made. Hope was also under investigation that she breached ethics for something that was done by her replacement. Hope's supervisor began dismantling her region and eventually Hope was not doing much of anything while she was waiting for something to happen. Hope would be ignored, isolated, or purposefully not communicated to and then would get yelled at and blamed for everything by her supervisor. Hope's supervisor would repeatedly tell her that she had no confidence in her, was a horrible leader, liar, and that she was still accountable for things that were happening in her former region even though she had been removed from that role. Hope feels that nothing that she says or does is good enough for the supervisor and has tried everything possible to fix the situation. Hope even tried going to HR, with no response to the situation.

Even though Hope's lived experience is still continuing, she is trying to do the best that she can every day. Hope is still giving her all, even though her supervisor and the organization do not value her and have repeatedly told her and inferred that she is worthless, does not deserve to be listened to or receive kindness, compassion, or be positively communicated to. Hope feels bullied every day in this extremely toxic and abusive culture.

Ian

Ian was a white male, was married with one child, and approximately 36 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Ian completed his studies for a master's degree and was working as an administration and operations advisor for the U.S. Military in Italy. Ian is close with his family, had a very happy upbringing, and was thoroughly enjoying his career progression as an officer in the U.S. Army. Ian loved his job, enjoyed the mentorship he

continuously received during his career, excelled in all of his positions, had a thriving social life, and felt like the U.S. Army believed that it truly treated all of its people with dignity and respect.

Ian had a supervisor who routinely discriminated based upon gender and sexual preference, was openly dishonest, and who habitually sought to damage the careers and reputations of those who were not like her. This supervisor's actions were not only overlooked, but she was also not held accountable and she was continuously rewarded by her superiors. On the day of Ian's arrival at the organization, this supervisor put Ian in a lower-level position because of things that she heard about him. Ian noticed immediately that the climate and culture were incredibly hostile, especially towards him, which hard for him to understand and believe as he had no prior professional relationship, interaction, or history with the supervisor. As the treatment continued over months and eventually years, Ian realized that the toxicity and abuse was not only directed at him, but at a specific type of person, which Ian was part of. Informal and formal complaints alike were never addressed, and the supervisor's abusive power continued to grow. Ian would frequent speak with others who were going through the same treatment and would try to devise strategies to change perceptions or the way he and others were treated. The volatility, reprimands, verbal abuse, and other adverse treatment began eroding Ian's health and wellbeing. Ian's mood began to deteriorate, he began questioning his own morals, values, and ethics, and military ethos. Ian's free time was spent on worry, doubt, and fear of what the abusive supervisor and her toxic followers would do next. Because of this worry, doubt, and fear, Ian's sleep became nonexistent, he was in a constant state of mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, he gained a lot of weight, and his body was not healthy. Ian's marriage also spiraled out of control, with the marriage ultimately resulting in a divorce.

While it has been more than five years since Ian's lived experience, he has struggled every day since then. Ian still has trouble trusting superior officers and he does not believe that any systems that the U.S. Army or military have built to eradicate toxicity and unfair practices will work. Ian is still withdrawn from his professional life and has stopped believing that equality, justice, and dignified treatment from senior personnel is possible. Ian found that he can only maintain relationships that were with people who also experienced the same phenomenon that he did, resulting in support group type meetings as opposed to growing relationships. Ian does sleep a little better now, but it is fitful and not helpful to recovery. Ever since his lived experience, Ian has been counting the minutes until he is no longer obligated to serve in the U.S. Army, the organization that purposefully failed to hold the perpetrator accountable.

Jenny

Jenny was a white female, was married, and approximately 37 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Jenny obtained a master's degree and was working as an advisor to the Company Commander, which is an equivalent to a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a small company, for the U.S. Military in South Carolina. She is close with her family, even though her parents were divorced, she had a happy upbringing, and thoroughly enjoyed her career in the military. She was an incredibly optimistic person, had incredibly strong morals and values, a growth mindset, never took no for answer, always would find ways to better approach problems, and would always fight for what was right.

Jenny had a second line supervisor that openly and publicly degraded and berated Marines and officers of all ranks, was verbally abusive, and used career ending administrative and nonjudicial punishment against anyone who did not overtly fall in line with his objectives, even when his actions were in violation of Navy and Marine Corps policy or federal law. There

were times after teams within the organization were extremely successful, and instead of praising the individuals and teams, the supervisor would highlight any problems or challenges the teams had, and would refuse to acknowledge any successes. It appeared that any success was met with reprimands and even punishments. There were a large number of resignations from personnel in the organization just so they could get away from this supervisor. Jenny identified that this supervisor was circumventing Navy and Marine Corps policies and skirting federal standards and laws and brought it to the supervisor's attention. Jenny was met by the supervisor directing her to continue the status quo, even though it was proper or ethical. Jenny refused and became a target of the supervisor. The targeting included multiple reprimands and adverse and permanent administrative paperwork which results in prohibiting further progress of Jenny's career. Jenny saw that poor performing Marines that also supported this supervisor's toxic ways were protected, praised, and provided growth and promotion opportunities. Because of the increased toxicity, bullying, and abuse from the supervisor and those that supported him, Jenny began to have trouble sleeping, trusting others, lost faith in the organization, and ultimately had to leave the organization.

While over a year has passed since Jenny's lived experience, she still does not sleep well, believes that people like her are disposable at any time, is suspicious of others, has trust issues, and is still withdrawn. Jenny still has not returned to the Marine Corps or any other type of employment as the toxic leadership and organization was extremely devastating for her. Jenny is still anxious, withdrawn, not psychologically ready to pursue other opportunities, still needs time to decompress from the extremely toxic supervisor, and wants to return to who she was before the phenomenon.

Kathy

Kathy was a white female, single, and approximately 48 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Kathy had obtained a master's degree and was working as a kindergarten teacher for a U.S. Department of Defense school in Germany for more than a year, where she also held a couple of other positions in the school, such as school improvement team and the social committee. Kathy is close with her family, had a great upbringing, and early on had a successful career. Kathy was known for enjoying her work, having good working relationships with her supervisors and colleagues, a constant positive attitude, team player, hard worker, carefree, and leader.

Kathy had a coworker who was constantly harassing her, saying negative things to other members of the organization, and would consistently complain to the principal about the way Kathy was teaching her students. The principal enabled the co-worker to continue complaining, thus escalating the toxic culture that was already forming. While the principal told Kathy that her co-worker was "crazy, insecure, and jealous", he never did anything else to solve the situation. Eventually, Kathy and many of her co-workers would have to continuously walk on eggshells around the complaining co-worker and principal or over compensating to make them happy. Kathy was under constant stress, always thinking about the negative situation. Thinking about the toxic culture would keep Kathy up at night, disrupting sleep, and she gained weight and was not her usual chipper and positive self. Kathy was unhappy and unfulfilled at work and always felt a weight on her shoulders as soon as she would enter the school building.

While some time has passed since Kathy's lived experience, she has still not fully recovered. Kathy has fully regained her positivity and has lost the weight that she put on during her stressful experience. However, Kathy has not fully regained her positive attitude.

Luke

Luke was a white male, single, and approximately 22 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Luke completed a bachelor's degree and was working as an entry level marketing associate for an advertising and publishing company in Florida. He is close with his family, had a very happy upbringing, and was trying to progress through his new life as an adult, after serving in the military and completing college. He was a very positive person, a hard worker, had an active social life, and was motivated to be professional successful.

After joining this organization, Luke quickly found that the culture was “dog-eat-dog”, where the organization's focus was only on gaining sales. The lower and mid-level managers were poor performing salespeople, who were placed in management positions. Some managers were just mismanaging, however, combined with managers who were “alpha's”, a culture of fear was cultivated. This culture of fear forced salespeople to only focus on staying in manager's good graces, as opposed to trying to perform for the benefit of the organization. This culture was ingrained at all levels of the organization, to include all newly hired employees.

Luke quickly became a target because he did not assimilate well into the toxic culture. One of Luke's supervisors accused him of falsifying marketing sales, which quickly resulted in Luke's professional satisfaction rapidly declining. His situation continued to get worse at the organization, and it resulted in Luke withdrawing socially professionally and personally, losing his self-confidence, his mental state was declining, Luke was sleeping extremely poorly, and he stopped working as he did not know what else to do. Luke's supervisors were indifferent to Luke's reduction in productivity and the supervisors never bothered to actually investigate the allegation. Luke eventually left the organization and took a job in a new field so he could support himself. While Luke's new position was not purposeful and did not challenge him, he

felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders, his mood, character, social life, sleeping habits, and professional satisfaction all positively increased. While over two decades have passed since Luke experienced the organization's toxic culture, he is still troubled by what transpired and it brings back unwelcome memories.

Maria

Maria was a white female, was widowed twice, had four grown children that were all out of the house, and approximately 60 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Maria had completed a bachelor's degree, completed some work towards her master's degree, and was working for the largest real estate board in the northeast in Massachusetts. She is close with her family, had a good upbringing, and was very fulfilled during her professional career, both as an employee of companies and owning her own company. Maria was a very positive person, enjoyed the challenge of business, and spent a lot of time contributing to her community.

Maria had a supervisor that treated her and other members of the organization extremely poorly, tried to circumvent labor and wage laws, would purposefully make people look and feel like fools, and would treat members of the organization like they were a lesser class. This toxic supervisor was solely looking out for himself and would put his focus on bullying and demoralizing the staff, and would put his own needs and benefit and of everyone else, including the organization. The supervisor continued to create an extreme culture by having an affair with at least one member of the organization, by firing others, and by manipulating property records. There was no accountability of the supervisor. Because of the increased toxicity, high employee turnover, bullying, abuse, lack of trust and respect, and overall narcissism, Maria eventually left the organization.

Even though a number of years has passed since Maria's lived experience, almost all of the other members have left the organization due to the toxicity. However, Maria has been thriving in her community. It took her a little while to adjust to the lack of toxicity in her new roles in her community, she still has some concerns about trust and how people treat others.

Nancy

Nancy was a white female, was married with one adult child, and approximately 60 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Nancy held a master's degree and was working as a district supervisor for a United States based nonprofit organization in multiple countries in Europe. Nancy had a good upbringing, had a good relationship with her family, and was, was very social, and was always trying to make an impact on her community.

Nancy had an extremely toxic supervisor who had "posse" with two followers, who would harass, bully, make threats, insults, retaliate, suppress, demean, and did many other things to Nancy and others. The toxic culture and hostile work environment did not start out that way for Nancy. For the first few months she started working for this specific organization, peers and supervisors at all levels were very complimentary about Nancy's performance and contributions, some even calling her a "rock star", which was very positive feedback for her. Nancy had been reinvigorating programs that were dormant or that never really materialized, formed relationships with many important personnel who could influence or direct change, and was increasing the number of volunteers within the organization. Nancy was extremely proud of herself as she was never provided any onboarding training or guidance about her role or expectations. Then one day, Nancy was called into her supervisor's office about a training that she did not complete. Nancy did not know when the training was specifically due or the importance of it as it was never fully explained to her. While Nancy's first-, second-, and third-line supervisors were

disciplining her, they told her that she could not speak at all, and later that she was worthless to them. Nancy's supervisors also began telling her about all of her shortfalls, that she was terribly performing her duties, and that others had grievances about her. Nancy was completely shocked and in disbelief as she had not heard one negative thing about her performance before this. Things just got worse for Nancy as her supervisors were just trying every way to get her fired or transferred. Nancy's supervisors would never tell her what the actual problems were so she could try to fix them, they would just reprimand her every chance they could. This treatment was not just reserved for Nancy though. Nancy would see how the supervisors would treat others, which was full of hostility and abuse. Nancy would arrive to work many times thinking that she would rather be anywhere but there. Nancy noticed that her mental health was declining. Nancy was always distracted by the toxicity that was around her than producing quality work and results that she is accustomed to. Nancy would frequently call her husband, while hysterical, after her supervisor would scream at her in front of many others. When Nancy would go to the human resources department, she would just be told that they would look into it. Nancy quickly came to the realization that human resources was just there to protect the organization.

While over five years have passed since Nancy's lived experience, she still remembers the toxic culture and its actions extremely vibrantly like it was yesterday. Nancy still thinks about how she was considered useless and the one time a supervisor told her that it was her job to make Nancy miserable. Nancy no longer trusts organizations and still cannot understand why or how people can be so hostile, manipulative, horrible, toxic, and evil to others.

Oscar

Oscar was a white male, was married, had two stepchildren, and approximately 35 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Oscar held a bachelor's degree and was working as a department supervisor in the U.S. Military. He is close with his family, had a normal and happy childhood, and was thoroughly enjoying his career progression throughout his almost 20-year military career. He was extremely trusting to those appointed in senior level positions, committed, very happy to go to work every day, and was always focused on accomplishing the mission.

Oscar had an organizational leader who continuously broke regulations and federal labor laws and would put members of the organization into personal servitude. There was a big event that was held for many years before Oscar arrived at the organization, where they told members of the organization that they must volunteer at the event, even though it was for personal gain of the organizational leaders. Nobody had a choice on whether they could volunteer or not, they had to arrive at their appointed time and day. The personnel would have no food or lodging supplied to them and they would sleep in their clothes, out in the open on the grass, and in the cold. If someone complained about the conditions or having to volunteer, they would be met with reprimands or retaliation. The senior leaders of the organization would be told by lawyers that they were authorized to do this, there was nothing wrong with it, and everyone just needed to comply. Oscar felt that it was not fair to treat people like that or for the indentured servitude. Oscar prohibited all of the personnel who worked for him to participate. Senior leaders did not agree with Oscar's stance and he quickly became a target. Oscar was shunned immediately and almost all managers in the toxic organization refused to communicate with him, even about job related issues. No matter how much Oscar tried to communicate with his peers and superiors, he

was ignored. In addition to being ignored, the organization's culture was deteriorating. Personnel, who were complaining and suffering due to still having to work the personal events, would also turn against Oscar and his staff. The toxic culture began adversely impacting Oscar's sleep habits, mood, and professional satisfaction, to the point that he wanted to leave the military after 19 years of service.

While there was an eventual investigation into what happened at the organization, it did not lessen what happened to Oscar and his staff. Oscar was interviewed by investigators and was later retaliated against once others found out. Oscar did everything possible to insulate him and his staff. While the investigation corroborated everything that Oscar encountered during his time in the organization, the senior leaders were only forced to transfer or retire, which was not considered a real punishment. Even though it has been a few years since Oscar's lived experience, he has still not fully rebounded. Oscar's sleep is back to where he thinks it should be and he has a policy to not bring work home with him. Oscar ultimately left the U.S. military as he lost professional satisfaction and trust in his organization and its leaders.

Paul

Paul was a white male, was married, and approximately 49 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Paul had obtained a juris doctorate chair of an academic program and a professor at a university in Charleston, South Carolina. Paul had a good upbringing, was an extremely positive person, was enthusiastically committed to his organization, and enjoyed his multifaceted career in law and academia.

Paul applied for a promotion and ultimately did not obtain the position. However, the person who was offered the position knew this and held it against Bob during the rest of the time he was there. Once Paul's supervisor began working in the organization, he immediately let Paul

know that he was not as qualified as the supervisor was and also did not understand how Paul's academic was so successful. In addition to this, Paul's supervisor treated everyone horribly, would undermine many, and was the driving force for an extremely toxic organizational culture.

Paul's supervisor would consistently make unethical and illegal hiring, firing, and employment decisions. The supervisor would not listen to any of the staff or the employment lawyers that were on the faculty, as his decisions were to be questioned by nobody. Any time that Paul or others in the organization would voice their concerns about employment decisions, or the financial irregularities that were happening, the supervisor would just target them and inflict further pain. It came to the point where everyone on the staff would fear coming to work on Fridays as it may their last day or a close colleague's at the organization.

Paul initially tried to conform with the new supervisor's requirements, until they were unethical and illegal. Paul then fought with the supervisor, and ultimately chose to leave the organization due to the toxicity and the supervisor's abuse. However, it took time for Paul to leave as he was severely impacted by the toxic leader: He was not the same person as he was before this supervisor took the role, this toxicity caused Paul's clinical depression, Paul retreating, his "ability to see in color" and adversely impacted Paul's marriage, to the point where his wife divorced him due to this change in behavior.

While it has been more than five years since Paul's lived experience, he is not as optimistic as he once was. This toxicity did not just apply to Paul and his colleagues, but also to those that replaced them. Two of the people that replaced Paul were eventually fired, along with many others. Eventually, this supervisor was investigated and fired for his employment practices and financial irregularities. However, it took about nine months after Paul left for him to start putting his life together. Even today, Paul tries to avoid bitterness, misses where he lived and the

work that he did, feels bad for his ex-wife, has been trying to recoup about six years of lost momentum professionally and personally and just rebuild his life. Paul “lost status and momentum in my career that has been hard to reclaim”. Paul still dislikes that he was right but he is glad and proud that he opposed the toxic leader on moral and ethical grounds.

Quest

Quest was a white female, single, and approximately 52 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Quest had obtained a master’s degree, obtained a Juris Doctorate, was pursuing a doctorate, and was working as an assistant principal at a public elementary school in northern Virginia. She is close with her family, had a great upbringing, and had a successful career.

Quest had a toxic manager, who was also the principal at the same school, that was allowing situations that would purposefully put children in harm’s way. Quest reported this situation multiple times to the principal, with no positive change for the children. When Quest reported to the district supervisor the actions that were putting students in danger and the principal’s lack of response, the district supervisor did not take any action. Once Quest’s supervisor heard that Quest went to her second level supervisor, Quest then became a target. The principal would bully Quest and others who spoke up, threatened to end Quest’s career, ended others’ careers, would not allow anyone lateral moves to other schools within the district, and would use nepotism and cronyism to keep the culture extremely toxic. The district superintendent was indifferent about the toxic manager’s actions, bullying, legal issues that were created, and the extremely high turnover rate of employees for years. In addition to feeling the injustice at the hands of someone with no morals or values, there was no accountability for the principal’s actions and her arrogance and behavior were glorified by the district superintendent

and the school board. Quest consistently felt threatened by the physical presence of her manager, would be sick to her stomach, and was unable to eat, sleep, or focus. The toxic pattern eventually became the expectation in the organization. Quest eventually left her position as she could no longer handle the bullying and disparate treatment any longer.

While some time has passed since Quest's lived experience, she has still not fully recovered. Quest is still not optimistic about working in the public-school environment and now believes that most school system and any human organizations suffer similarly. While the principal was eventually fired after years of toxicity, the school district's enabling the behavior and not confronting the problems just reinforced her belief that power worked and that there were no real reporting options to fix the problems.

Rita

Rita was a white female, was single, and approximately 24 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Rita completed her bachelor's degree and was just recruited to be in the U.S. Military as a satellite communications technician in Massachusetts. Rita was close with her family and grew up believing that equality was real, and women had the same rights and opportunities as men. Rita was young, naïve, trusting, extremely happy, and was looking forward to what life had to offer to her.

Rita was invited to a work function, by her supervisor, at the supervisor's residence. Rita was the first one to arrive. Nobody else showed up to this work event. While she was waiting for others to arrive, Rita believes that the supervisor drugged her drink, because she could not remember much of what happened after that. All Rita remembers is that she all of a sudden could not stay awake, she kept on falling asleep on the supervisor's couch, and the supervisor picked her up from the couch and put Rita in his bed to rape her. Rita could not tell any of her

coworkers or other supervisors as she did not know who to tell, so she stayed silent. Rita was sexually assaulted by supervisors four other times in a two-year period. On this fifth time she was sexually assaulted, she fought back. The supervisor was upset that he was rejected by Rita and he threatened to fail her from the course she was attending, which would have adversely impacted her career, if not ended it. Rita could not tell anyone about this sexual assault either because in other instances where she voiced what happened to herself or others, Rita would see that the organization and investigators would not take it seriously. Rita graduated from the course two weeks later just to find two of her previous supervisors, who also sexually assaulted her, as her first- and second-line supervisors. Rita spent the next year trying to stay away from these supervisors, as she did not have the option to leave her position as she was contractually obligated to the government and could go to prison if she tried leaving. Unfortunately, one of the abusive supervisors cornered Rita and sexually assaulted her again. Luckily, a fellow soldier heard her screams and rescued her at some point during the sexual assault. Rita reported the sexual assaults to the military police and she was met with a lack of proper investigations and a toxic organizational culture of retaliation, harassment, bullying, ostracization, bullying, and abuse. Even though the rapists admitted to their acts, there was no justice as the organization just swept it under the rug. Rita became extremely depressed, had a lot of anxiety, felt alone and unsafe, was numb most of the time, and she began feeling suicidal. Stories would precede Rita to new organizations and she was treated as a troublemaker and targeted frequently. Rita was eventually dismissed from her organization and the Air Force because she was such a troublemaker.

During and after the lived experience, which finally ended over 15 years ago, Rita frequently thought about dying in a car accident, so her family would think her death was a

suicide and not a suicide. Rita trusts very few people, mostly has trouble having meaningful relationships, has frequent PTSD episodes, and still feels defeated. Rita had at least one nervous breakdown since the lived experience. While Rita did find a deep connection and eventually married someone who lovingly cared for her, she did change from being an extravert to an introvert, and is really just a shell of her former self.

Sam

Sam was a white male, married, and approximately 24 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Sam was in an undergraduate program and was working in project management for a small company in California for more than a year. He is very close with his family, had a great upbringing, and was in the beginnings of a successful career.

Sam had a manager who was very volatile and unpredictable at times. Sam and his three coworkers never knew which version of this manager they were going to see each day. The manager had marriage issues and that would play out at the office. The manager would yell at anyone who made mistakes. While Sam was rarely on the receiving end of it, he was often there when it happened. The manager was very friendly some days and then very volatile, explosive other days, not just with the employees, but with customers as well. The manager would frequently get upset at customers, and then would yell, threaten to sue the customer, and slam the phone. One of the times that the manager was yelling at one of Sam's teammates, Sam called the manager out on it and told him that he needs to be a little bit more compassionate and understanding. Eventually it came to the point where one time the manager yelled and screamed at Sam in front of other employees and told Sam to leave for the day so he could think about what he did wrong. Once Sam became the target, he began thinking about leaving and the type

of organizational culture. Sam was under constant stress, always thinking about the negative situation, which is why he chose to leave.

Many years have passed since Sam's lived experience. Sam considers himself very resilient and quickly rebounded after he left the toxic manager, culture, and environment. While he has always believed that most people are nice, respectful, compassionate, and understanding, it did take him a while after he left to fully trust others again. Even though he encountered another toxic leader and organization many years later, he still maintains his positive attitude and counts his encounters with toxic individuals and organizations as learning experiences.

Tim

Tim was a Hispanic male, was married with one child, and approximately 30 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Tim completed secondary school and trade school and was just starting out his career working as journeyman wireman and electrician in southern California. Tim grew up poor but he had a good family, was always positive, in a great mood, happy, and was trying to progress through his new career.

Tim had a supervisor that was mentally, physically, and emotionally abusive to the employees. In addition to the manager being racist, he broke labor laws and forced all subordinates to break labor and safety laws daily. The supervisor created a culture of fear, stress, manipulation, and distrust. When Tim's coworkers would not follow the direction of the supervisor, it would always result in verbal reprimands, and sometimes broken teeth, severed fingers, or worse atrocities. The supervisor felt that every single employee was lucky to have a job each day. Tim did everything possible to avoid targeting from the supervisor, always protected his team, and documented everything that was happening. Tim was successful in keeping the abusive and bullying supervisor away from him and team, but it came at a personal

cost. Tim was in a constant state of depression, anxiety, and worry. Tim was terrified to come to work every day as he was fearful of what would happen and he and his team did not have the basic tools, materials, even skilled labor, that were needed to complete jobs. Tim's social life was impacted because his wife and close friends would only hear about the stresses and experiences from his job. Tim's sleep became extremely poor. Tim also became extremely disappointed in himself as he blamed himself for what was happening, that he was tied to this employment option, and that there was no way out.

Tim was eventually offered a lower-level role at a previous organization that he worked for and he accepted immediately. Tim quickly began sleeping better, had more energy, and his mood began to change. He was no longer deep in depression, fear, or anxious, he slowly began transitioning to his prior happy, relaxed self. Tim felt that a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders, he became more confident, and began producing at a higher level professionally. Tim has not experienced a toxic organization since, but is still on the lookout for any signs of future turmoil.

Ulysses

Ulysses was a white male, was married with three children, and approximately 43 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Ulysses had a master's degree and was working as the senior enlisted advisor for an organization within the U.S. Military in Guam. Ulysses grew up in a very small town, married his high school sweetheart, very spiritual and conservative, and is an optimist.

Ulysses had a supervisor who told Ulysses in the first 10 minutes of meeting him that he hated and did not trust senior enlisted advisors and would do everything possible to destroy Ulysses and his peers. This supervisor has a proponent of hazing employees and would blame

Ulysses or others when he was not allowed to personally haze members of the organization. The supervisor made Ulysses and others feel like no matter what they did, they were always wrong. The toxic supervisor would frequently disparage, belittle, and used power over those he could. The supervisor was always late to meetings, ceremonies, or functions and would quickly blame others. When Ulysses would try to get his supervisor to events on time, the supervisor would tell him that he was too busy. Ulysses and others in senior leadership roles were never in sync with the supervisor and there was no team atmosphere. The supervisor was only focused on himself and whatever priorities he wanted to accomplish, which were not in line with organizational or Department of the Navy goals or mission. The supervisor at times would give Ulysses and others direction but would then later be upset that nobody followed his direction and give out new and conflicting orders. Ulysses and other leaders in the organization noticed that their subordinates' anxiety and stress were at extremely high levels. Members at the lowest level of the organization saw and knew that there was dysfunction in the highest levels of the organization, would avoid the supervisor at all costs, would talk about the dysfunction culture amongst each other.

Ulysses spent the entire time the toxic supervisor was there making sure that all personnel were looked after and not adversely impacted by the supervisor or his abusiveness. While Ulysses did not notice any positive or negative impact on his own health by the toxic supervisor, he did notice that he did not have as much professional satisfaction as before or after the supervisor was at the organization. However, Ulysses did notice that his stress levels were high, he was adjusting his professional habits, he had to be more effective in his leadership to counteract the toxic supervisor, and said that it was the most difficult 18 months of his professional career.

Victor

Victor was a white male, was married with two children, and was in his late 30s at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Victor was finishing his bachelor's degree and was a senior advisor in the U.S. Military in the Washington, DC area. Victor was always an extremely happy person, outgoing, will help anyone with anything, and would always show up to work very early and leave late.

Victor had a supervisor who had an extremely big ego. The supervisor only looked out for himself, felt that he was the smartest person in the room and the only one who knew anything, and that all members of the organization were there to serve him. What made this situation worse, was that this organization was in a combat environment, where everyone's lives were on the line and stress levels were extremely high every day. The supervisor always wanted to be in the spotlight, and whenever anyone was a threat to that, the supervisor would immediately target them. If a member of the organization was also a threat to his ego, emotional status, perceived power, and strength, he would badger, belittle, and humiliate that person to a point to where the person felt like they were a lesser person. Members in the organization would volunteer for extra duties in combat just so they would not have to interact with the supervisor. They instead would rather risk getting injured or killed. When personnel would have to be in the same area as the supervisor, they would evade him as much as possible and bypass the supervisor as frequently as possible as any engagement would result in yelling, belittling, or humiliation. Victor was on edge all of the time, lost his motivation, and was losing his bubbly personality. Eventually, Victor found that he was very disgruntled and had an "I don't care" attitude. Victor frequently thought that the toxic supervisor and followers were out to get him and was verified by the supervisor by openly saying that he was out to get Victor. Victor's

relationship with his family was quickly changing for the worse and his PTSD was triggered by the abusive supervisor's actions. Victor was past his mental, emotional, and physical limit and at times he felt that he was better off dead than to deal with the toxic culture.

While many years have passed since Victor's lived experience, he still has the internal scars, or what still looks like open wounds and is still completely withdrawn. Victor's PTSD has continued from the lived experience without reprieve. The mental, emotional, and physical ailments that impact him daily may take many years to repair to the point where Victor's health becomes manageable. However, Victor is not confident that he will be able to rebound from the abuse and toxicity, and feels that it may be permanent or even fatal. Victor is truly a shell of his former self.

Wendy

Wendy was a white female, married with one child, and approximately 29 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Wendy held a master's degree and was working as a middle level manager for the U.S. Military in southern California. She comes from a large family and seems like she had a good upbringing. Wendy felt like she was at a high point in her career and just transferred from a three-year assignment that was personally and professionally rewarding. She was a very positive person, extremely happy, high achiever, and enjoyed working with others.

Wendy had a head manager in her organization that prioritized personal pet projects over the mission of the organization, constantly looked for ways to add unnecessary events to the staff's schedule to showcase his visionary accomplishments, which would require hundreds of hours of rehearsals and practice because the manager did not want the organization to look bad in front of others. The manager also intensely demanded that the staff provide endless details in an

organization that prioritized "mission tactics" and "empowering leaders". Under this toxic manager, there was no trust in any employees, regardless of position or role, unless an individual had demonstrated personal loyalty to him. Almost all 200 employees in the organization could not perform effectively because of the lack of trust and the culture of fear that the manager fostered. There was no accountability of the manager or change in his actions, other than to become more brazen. The manager maliciously destroyed careers, created a network of "spies" and massive mistrust between 200 employees, and manipulated all formal complaint processes and the key personnel in those processes. The manager would purposely provide career ending evaluations to any employee that was not perfectly aligned with his behavior. There was an extremely high turnover at the organization, constant stress, an overall unhealthy environment, and many did not feel psychologically safe. There were a few coworkers, who were also suffering as much or more than Wendy was, that would speak to her about their fears, safety, and stress as there was nobody else that they could trust. While many of these coworkers were seeing mental health professionals, Wendy still listened and did whatever she could to listen, protect, and fight for them. However, Wendy began internalizing the toxicity, which resulted in an intense mental health breakdown which required her to seek medical attention and behavioral health intervention after the repeated attempts by various members of the unit to address the toxic command climate were unsuccessful. But her health continued to decline from there. She had even more intense stress episodes, extremely disturbing dreams, constant and painful tension headaches, and had several thoughts of suicide. Wendy did not want to die, she just wanted to escape her work situation and had exhausted all other means to remedy it. Wendy eventually chose to leave the organization due to her deteriorating health.

While 18 months have passed since Wendy's lived experience, she still has to be mindful of her mental, physical, and emotional health. Wendy has been working on helping restore her coworkers' careers with the U.S. Military, has been trying to increase her fitness routine, singing in her church choir, and recognizing triggers, all of which has been extremely helpful. Wendy is slowly recovering from the experience but has only recently desired to return to work with a non-military organization.

Xavier

Xavier was a white male, had a partner, and approximately 25 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Xavier completed his bachelor's degree and was working as a courts and grounds maintenance supervisor for a national sports governing body in Florida. He is close with his family and was trying to progress through his new life as an adult. He was an extremely confident, bright, and passionate person and was extremely excited for his career in sports.

Xavier experienced an extremely toxic culture and had a supervisor who was mainly narcissistic and emotionally manipulated others. Xavier was led to believe, by the supervisor, that if he spoke out against a superior, who was doing something unethical, that he would be punished with written disciplinary action and no option for pay raises. It was a culture of fear and control by upper management and one that got the better of many within the organization.

Once Xavier said something about what he saw, he became a target of the toxic supervisor. Xavier was blamed, written up, and counseled for inappropriate things that other supervisors were doing during different shift, and even while he was on vacation. The lies that were being told about Xavier eventually made it to senior level personnel within the organization, where an adverse employment appraisal was given to him. Xavier was not the only

one that was suffering the wrath of this and other toxic supervisors. There were five other employees in the organization that were fired due to “organizational changes” but were most likely let go due to these employees speaking up over time. Xavier’s time with the organization was short lived as he was let go two weeks later for the same reasons.

It has been about 18 months since Xavier left the organization and has had time to assess what he experienced. Xavier never felt so lost or afraid of going to work for fear of what might be said to him each and every day. Towards the end of his employment there, Xavier’s supervisor stripped all responsibilities from him and then would be upset that he was not accomplishing tasks, which led to his every move being micromanaged with my every move. Xavier has felt paralyzed since he was terminated and has not been able to find gainful employment yet, let alone a fulfilling career or position. He has not yet remotely returned to that bright, young, and passionate person he once was.

Yvette

Yvette was a white female, single, and approximately 27 years old at the time she was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Yvette had a master’s degree and was working as a customer service coordinator for a national sports governing body in southern California for more than a year. She is close with her family, had a very happy upbringing, and was trying to progress through her new life as an adult. She was a very positive person, extremely happy, high achiever, and enjoyed working with others.

Yvette had two toxic managers that she worked with, one that she reported to and another director adjacent to her supervisor. When these two managers had to work on projects or tasks together, they became somewhat "frenemies." Yvette’s manager would explain her role within the project one way, while the other director would explain the role to differently to their team.

When both teams would collaborate, they were not on the same page. Yvette brought this up to her manager so that both managers could better communicate to each other. Instead of trying to fix the miscommunication, Yvette's manager accused her of not listening or doing her work properly. Yvette eventually became a target of both managers toxic behavior. The managers would purposefully give Yvette conflicting information and would openly talk and laugh about it in front of other employees. The human resources department even acknowledged that there was a problem with these managers. With no resolution in sight, Yvette began to avoid her managers at all costs, would take the stress of her work home with her and discuss it with friends and family, was constantly feeling rejected and not heard, and Yvette was not her normal happy self. Yvette was eventually fired by the organization as they did not want to address the situation or deal with a "complainer".

While it has been over a year since Yvette left the organization, she still struggles with speaking up when she sees something wrong as she still fears that she will be fired, even though she is at a new organization. Her family has repeatedly told her that she continues to become happier as time passes. Yvette has also strived to find a better work and life balance as the toxic organization put her in a dark place and the stress was extremely unbearable.

Zack

Zack was a Native American and Native Hawaiian male, divorced, had a partner, two children, and approximately 46 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Zack held two master's and two bachelor's degrees and was working as a senior level executive within the U.S. Military, as a civilian employee and student, in Arizona. Zack had a normal childhood and joined the military at 17 years old. Zack has been successfully progressing through his career, both military and civilian, ever since. Zack was happy, very

social, an extremely trusting and positive person, and always believed in doing the right thing at all times.

Zack recently reported to a senior executive fellowship and training program where he discovered that his new supervisor frequently violated federal laws, committing misconduct daily, and damaged students' careers for over four years. Once Zack identified and confirmed his suspicions, he attempted to discuss it with the supervisor and it immediately resulted in Zack being targeted, not only by the supervisor but by others within the organization as well. When Zack reported it to higher level supervisors, they acted like they cared and said they would talk to the supervisor. The organization never spoke to the supervisor, took the word of the supervisor that Zack was a liar, and joined the others who were already targeting Zack.

Zack contacted a senator's office and other high ranking military personnel and the U.S. Army finally opened an investigation into this organization and its leadership personnel. The investigation corroborated Zack's accusations, but that did not change how he was being treated. As the organization continuously tried to remove him from the program, Zack began feeling betrayed by the system that he spent his life serving honorably. Zack saw personnel of all ranks covering up for other people's wrongdoing, to save themselves from embarrassment, instead of doing the right thing. Zack's professional satisfaction was at an all-time low, he felt that he lacked any form of psychological security, and feared that reporting anything wrong would only lead to more issues and retaliation.

While it has been over a year since Zack's lived experience began, he is still living it every day. Zack still feels broken and displaced. Zack continues to go through stages of grief, where he could not believe this was happening, felt like this was somehow his fault for not conforming and just overlooking their misconduct, and deep depression that he still has today.

Zack's mood is still dark, he is always irritable with his partner and children, and spends most of his spare time trying to find a solution to this issue. Zack rarely gets four hours of sleep. Even though there was corroboration to every accusation Zack has made in the investigation, he is not confident that there will be any accountability or meaningful change.

Alex

Alex was a white male, married with children, and approximately 49 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Alex completed his bachelor's degree, retired as a high-level manager in the U.S. military, and was working for a Fortune 500 company. He is close with his family, had an extremely happy upbringing, and had a successful career in the military. He really enjoyed leading teams, developing people, achieving goals, celebrating victories, and effectively communicating with others.

Alex had a supervisor that was new to the organization and immediately began changing many processes, procedures, and personnel, with no explanation, logic, or details. When Alex attempted to inquire and provide background and details as "why" certain things should not be changed, it was met with severe resistance. When changes were implemented, against the advice of all members of the organization, customers became upset with the new supervisor. This supervisor then shifted the blame directly to Alex, especially when customers stopped using this organization's services.

Once Alex became the target of everything the toxic supervisor was unhappy about, he was forced to work 30-40 more hours per week, would receive calls at all hours of the day and was expected to immediately fix problems the supervisor created, and would have to protect other members of the organization. Alex received no trust and did not trust the supervisor or others in leadership roles. The supervisor was on a destructive path, would purposefully

mentally and emotionally hurt employees, make decisions that were illegal and unsafe, and would frequently lie to customers and higher-level supervisors within the organization. The supervisor would find other toxic people to aid in her cause to treat people like “dirt”, justify her own behavior, and ensure that her actions remained unchecked.

Alex’s health began eroding because of the how he was treated within the toxic culture in the organization. In the few instances that Alex would be home with his family, he was not mentally or emotionally present. He began only sleeping three to four hours per night, which was interrupted by worry, concern, fear, or phone calls. His professional satisfaction was non-existent, and his health was deteriorating. Every time Alex tried to discuss the toxic culture with senior leaders, the toxic behavior heightened, and he continuously suffered retaliation and retribution.

Once Alex realized that there were no options to fix or positively influence the culture, Alex submitted his resignation. He immediately felt a great deal of relief and freedom. The first night after Alex resigned from his position, he slept for 16 hours straight and woke up with a whole new perspective. Within two weeks of Alex’s resignation, 18 other team members resigned as well.

While a few years have passed since Alex’s lived experience, it is still a difficult experience to think about. Alex was so withdrawn during the toxic experience and lost so much time with his family and his health suffered. It has taken time for Alex to rebound to where he is today.

Brett

Brett was a white male, was single, and approximately 35 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Brett completed a bachelor’s degree and was working as

an administration officer for the U.S. military in Italy, as a civilian employee. Brett had a positive upbringing and had success in both his military and civilian careers. Brett was career oriented and believed in building personal and professional relationships.

Brett had a supervisor that created a high stress environment, when the mission of organization and its customers were already extremely challenging. The organization was extremely short staffed and of resources due to multiple government shutdowns and hiring freezes, in addition to the unprecedented high influx of customers. The toxic supervisor was unhappy with any mistakes by Brett or his staff and would act as if those making mistakes were incompetent or were purposefully making the mistakes. The supervisor would take his own stress from personal and professional areas, and project it onto the staff frequently. The supervisor increasingly belittled Brett and the staff over time and had little to no empathy for the staff.

Brett's quality of life began to go downhill. His physical health was also adversely impacted, beginning with hypertension. Brett was worried all the time about every little thing. While Brett was known as an expert and go to person in his field, especially when it came to accomplishing extremely difficult projects or solving unique problems, he lost his self-confidence due to the toxic supervisor's actions and words. Brett was consistently stressed and eventually felt that he could no longer fix this culture of the organization. Brett no longer had career aspirations or goals.

While Brett initially tried to change the culture and work with the toxic supervisor to make things better, Brett decided to leave the organization. After leaving the organization, Brett realized how much stress he was actually under. Brett was not sleeping well during that period, he consumed alcohol excessively, gained weight, and rarely exercised. It took a long time to get

his mental, physical, and emotional health to a semi-sustainable level. Even though it has been a few years since Brett's lived experience, he is still not the same positive person as he was.

Chris

Chris was a white male, was married with three children, and approximately 40 years old at the time he was adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Chris held a bachelor's degree and was working as a high-level director in Atlanta, Georgia. Even though Chris' parents divorced when he was young, he still had a happy upbringing and excelled throughout his formative years. Chris described himself in three words before he encountered the toxic culture at his organization: Tight, he felt organized, with a sense of daily purpose; light, healthy, with a spring in his step; and bright, engaged and excited.

Chris had a supervisor, who led our group of about 40, that was desperate to protect his role in the organization. The group's engagement scores were the second lowest in the entire North American division, yet almost all of the employees' data showed very high levels of engagement, which meant that the supervisor was the issue. To deflect these issues, the supervisor made up very negative information about many of the employees, to include one employee who was his mistress, documented it with the human resources department through performance appraisals, and tried to position himself as the solution and not the problem. Chris' supervisor began a series of firings and put employees on performance improvement plans to show that he was addressing issues within his group.

Chris also became a target because of his willingness to say what he felt about the toxic culture. Chris quickly received a 30-page performance improvement plan to fix his performance, even though Chris was in the top 10 percent in all reporting categories every year. From there, Chris' supervisor would spread false rumors about Chris, was completely overbearing, and

focused on hurting Chris' relationships and performance. Chris began losing his hair, would get ill every morning thinking about work or when receiving a phone call or text message from the supervisor, lost an excessive amount of weight, and having problems sleeping and remaining calm. Chris eventually went to a doctor to get assistance, where he was prescribed multiple medications and the doctor also put him on short-term disability. Upon Chris' return to the organization, there was "reorganization" where those who spoke up about the toxic culture's positions were no longer available. Chris' time in the toxic group had come to an end, along with the income to provide for his family. But as one last gesture by Chris' supervisor, Chris was escorted by security out of the building, without his final paycheck, a copy of the severance package, or any of his belongings.

After a few weeks of time to sort through what happened, Chris began to calm and focus on the new opportunity he had ahead of him, not being abused by the old supervisor. Chris excelled in his career since then. While over 15 years have passed since Chris' lived experience, he still has not fully returned to the tight, light, and bright person he once was.

Results

The data collection for this research study began with the online survey. The surveys were taken through SurveyMonkey, an online survey service. There were 1,138 people who attempted to participate in the research study, with 1,129 people ultimately being eligible and participated in the online survey. During the online survey, 61 people opted in to participate in the other data collection methods, where I ended up interviewing 31 research participants. Each of the interviews took place over the phone or through Zoom, an online communication service. All of the research interviews were all conducted remotely, over the phone or through zoom, due to the fact that none of the research participants were within reasonable commuting distance and

due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing protocols. All of the phone interviews were recorded on my phone and all of the Zoom interviews were recorded in an audio format only and saved to a password protected computer, where I was the only person that had access. I also transferred all recorded phone interviews to the same password protected computer where the Zoom audio recordings were stored. Two, out of the 31 research participants, interview recordings were deleted as I had to stop the semi-structured interviews due to concerns over their mental, physical, or emotional health and the research participants eventually opted out of the research study. All 29 remaining research participants were asked to submit written statements of who the research participants were before and then after the lived experience. These written statements were then stored on the same password protected computer as the phone and Zoom audio recordings in order to protect the privacy and safety of each of the research participants. There is currently no identifying information in any of the collected data as most of the research participants did not provide any. However, in the few circumstances where potentially identifiable information was provided, the researcher removed the identifying information from the data. All questions developed for the online survey, interviews, and the written statement prompts were developed for the central research and sub questions identified in this research study.

Theme Development

Developing themes during this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study helped to better understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Each piece of collected data, whether it is a journal article, response to an interview or survey question, or a written statement, was truly part of the larger puzzle, was essential for the theme development (van Manen, 2016), and ultimately resulted in clearly understanding the lived

experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mjørud et al., 2017; van Manen, 2016) of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership.

The first data collection method was an online survey, where 1,129 participants 18 years of age or older completed the survey. The online surveys were followed by 29 completed semi-structured interviews, and each of the research participants who were interviewed were also asked to submit two written statements. From this collected data, along with literature that was collected and reviewed for this research, five themes and five sub themes were identified: Leadership with toxic leadership, behavior, and targeting as sub themes; toxicity; response; health with short-term health and long-term health as sub themes; and the organization's response.

Leadership or Lack Thereof

The primary yet unexpected theme of leadership was resident everywhere within this research study. Leadership, while mostly negative, was the most prevalent theme. All of the research participants conveyed the significance of leadership and its importance to organizational culture. However, the reason that leadership was the unexpected primary theme was because it was assumed by the researcher that the primary theme of the study would have been toxic culture, toxicity, or some variant of toxicity or culture. The link from leadership to toxicity and culture is undeniable and reflects the power that positive or adverse leadership has on toxicity and toxic culture.

All 29 of the research participants who completed their interviews conveyed that their lived experiences had to do with a particular manager or leader within the organization and that other lateral or higher-level leaders within the organization were aware of what was happening to the adversely impacted personnel or the toxic culture that the particular manager or leader was

cultivating. What “people deemed as acceptable and effective leadership” (Swanson et al., 2020) was really what the researcher began seeing early in the online surveys and continued taking notes about this during the rest of the data collection phases of semi-structured interviews and written statements. Wendy also discusses in her interview that each person’s “leadership styles are different” and leaders make a choice to lead for the betterment of people and the organization or to be harmful.

Toxic Leadership

While toxicity is another theme in itself, toxic leaders and toxic leadership were the intersection of both themes and by far the most noted and coded. Luke shared that good leaders focused and cared about their people while toxic leaders focused on themselves. Luke also discussed how toxic leaders are not leaders at all, but they have positional authority. While the definition of toxic leadership is still not agreed upon by academics (Green, 2014), most research reflects that “toxic leaders are distinct from other kinds of leaders through their neglect for the well-being of their subordinates, often resulting in interpersonally harmful or abusive behavior” (Matos et al., 2018, pp. 502-503).

Many of the research participants that were interviewed believed that toxic leaders learned the behavior during their formative years, in school, or during their early work or volunteering within organizations. Maria told me during her interview that “toxic leaders are just bullies” and her encounters with these bullies included their lack of self-confidence, communication skills, narcissism, critical thinking, self-thinking, and values. Maria also stated that toxic leaders are developed by how they are “brought up, starting in the home, a little more at school, and a little more as they get out into the world”. Nancy believes that toxic leaders exist because of ego and their unwillingness to change. Nancy discussed that toxic leaders do

realize many of their actions and flaws, and then choose not to adjust their toxic behavior or actions.

Brett, just like most of the other research participants, shared that the toxic leadership and culture in his organization was not immediate. Brett stated that at the beginning of his time at the organization, he felt that both of his supervisors were “fundamentally honest, well-meaning and good, and they were both kind of like him”. Tim took a position at a new organization during the economic downturn of 2008, and it was a thriving organization. When most of the organizations in his industry were folding or laying off most, if not all, of their employees, Tim felt that this organization must have had a decent organizational culture and positive leadership from the owner since this organization was flourishing. Ian also believed that the organization and leadership were not only not toxic but were extremely positive as he was previously at the organization and was surrounded by mostly positive leadership. These same “senior leaders asked him to return to the organization to revive” extremely important work that was faltering in the years since he transferred from the organization, which Ian took as a positive note and that the positive leadership would continue like before.

However, there were some research participants who did see some red flags concerning toxic culture before joining the organization. Xavier noticed red flags twice during his interview process but ignored the warnings as he was determined to get back into the sports industry. Rita was drugged, sexually assaulted, and raped by a senior leader in an organization after being hired but before her first day on the job and later in her career in the organization, she was transferred to a division where the organization knew that her assailant was working.

Most of the research participants’ lived experiences reflected that there was not one way that the toxic leadership emerged. While a few research participants did see red flags during an

interview process or prior to joining an organization, there were varied experiences of how the toxic leadership was unveiled. These varied experiences were not just at the semi-structured interview stage, but it was also noted at the previous stage of online surveys.

Ulysses' first encounter with the toxic leader was the beginning of the toxic relationship. In their first meeting, the toxic leader dressed Ulysses down "I don't fucking trust master chiefs. I don't fucking trust you. And I'm going to do everything in my power while I'm here to destroy you and make you irrelevant". Beth had a similar experience within the first few hours of her transferring to a new division within an organization she just joined six weeks before. Beth felt like "she was in front of a firing squad and raked over the coals in every way possible" because this toxic manager was not included in the discussion about Beth joining the division. The toxic manager constantly would "berate, belittle, chastise, demean, diminish, and castigate" everyone who worked with or liked Beth. Every day since the first meeting with Beth, the toxic manager would purposefully be dishonest to her at every turn to try to make her look bad, set her up for failure, or so Beth would miss important events or meetings from the start of Beth's time with the division. Alex's experience began after immediately joining a new organization when he saw that the CEO would not trust anyone or allow them to complete their work or roles. When Alex asked the CEO why he did this, and the CEO responded with "I don't trust any of them", along with the "most maniacal, like villainous laugh that Alex had ever heard coming out of anyone". When Alex conferred with his colleagues, every single one that he spoke to stated that they felt worthless and not trusted.

However, Gail's experience reflected that there were no immediate red flags in the interview process or once her time with the organization began. The toxic leadership developed over time, by Gail's manager asking her to stay late at work frequently for what seemed

legitimate reasons. One evening, Gail was again asked to work late and was also asked if she could give her manager a ride home. During this ride home, Gail was forcibly raped and was subsequently ignored, isolated, and then eventually targeted, treated differently, and yelled at while on duty. Jenny's experience also revealed that the toxic leader and culture developed over time. Jenny's organization was not replacing personnel as they would leave, resulting in almost a 50 percent reduction in staff. However, the CEO continuously expected the same or greater level of production with reduced staff capacity and would reprimand or fire those who argued for personnel safety or production concerns.

Kathy's experience was also developed over time but started with a difference of opinion as teaching styles. Since Kathy's teaching style was extremely different, some colleagues were unwilling to budge with their teaching styles and would give ignore, isolate, or yell at Kathy. When Kathy brought the situation to the school principal, the principal agreed with her but took no action to work with all parties, create learning opportunities, have hard discussions, or provide discipline. Due to the principal and others letting the situation fester, their leadership team and culture of the organization became extremely toxic over a long period of time.

Behavior

Toxic, destructive, abusive, and negative leadership behavior was frequently coded during literature review, the online survey, interviews, and written statements by the research participants. Many times I heard or read phrases and words, such as: Destructive leadership, abuse, abusive supervision, intimidation, belittling, humiliating, gaslighting, narcissism, bullying, and targeting. However, the behavior became worse, or intensified, once the individual brought how the behavior was hurting the organization to the leader or manager who was behaving destructively. After reviewing the collected research data, I again read the literature

that formed the basis of my research study and found that while these destructive, abusive, and toxic behavior mainly focused on control, obedience, and the abusive aspect of leadership, the negative behavior primarily impacted the organization (Aasland et al., 2010) and resulted in consequences for the execution of tasks, quality of work, efficiency, and relations with personnel, customers, and clients (Padilla et al., 2007). However, just like the definition of toxic leadership is still not agreed upon in academia, the definition of destructive, abusive, or toxic behavior is not only ill-defined, but also contains multiple behaviors that are still not fully understood (Aasland et al., 2010).

Quest learned this the hard way, when she saw that an entire sub population of students in a school district were being underserved or not supported at all. Quest, an assistant principal at one of the schools in this district, initially brought the issue to her supervisor. The principal did not agree with Quest's assessment and wanted things to continue the way they have been for decades: Supporting the permanent student population, while not supporting the large, minority, and transient population. The principal immediately identified Quest as a threat and that is when the abusive behavior began. The principal immediately began isolating Quest, purposefully withholding vital information, failing to communicate any information to her, and soliciting personnel from the district office and elected officials to target Quest at any available opportunity, whether it was on school grounds or out in the community. The principal's "need to control other people through emotions and by depriving them of either approval or of information, resorting to game playing, brought the worst in everyone", was extremely intentional and dysfunctional behavior.

Charles' experienced destructive behavior began immediately after he joined the organization. His introduction to the negative behavior from his vice president was "the way he

treated people, the rudeness, use of vulgar language, use of bullying tactics, bursts of anger for minor issues, all of which directly impacted the entire organization”. The vice president abused his staff to the point where all of the staff would freeze, not make any decisions, and would withhold information out of fear of being reprimanded. However, this toxic behavior was not just at the vice president level, the president learned the behavior through his tenure in the organization and forced those under his charge to utilize abuse and fear within teams and the organization. Just like research found through my literature review, the president and division vice president would “berate, belittle, and bully their subordinates, and the behaviors were often accompanied by threats and authoritarianism” (Matos et al., 2018, p. 503) with the sole goal exercising power.

Another example of toxic behavior was lived by Emma. The behavior was so destructive that most of the staff in the organization shared with other adversely impacted personnel how unsafe they felt. When the head of the library staff was visited by outside or higher-level personnel, she would treat her subordinates well. However, just like in the literature review, the destructive behavior is hidden until no one is watching, and then the toxic individual reverts back to the abuse to serve their agenda and ego (Winn & Dykes, 2019). The supervisor’s malicious behavior continued until personnel were broken, complied, or both.

Targeting

While leadership behavior was a major subtheme found throughout the research, the behavior of targeting by toxic managers was specifically discussed repeatedly, but not by the terms of “target” or “targeting”. As the child of the behavior subtheme, the idea of targeting was frequently discussed as a distinct behavior by those who witnessed or encountered the specific behavior. Once I noticed that the idea of targeting was frequently discussed, I searched through

how many times the words of target and targeting were actually used for the purpose of toxic leadership behavior towards an individual or group, and I found it in the following: In all of the literature that I reviewed, 44 documents used the words target or targeting but only 14 documents specifically discussed the word or phrase target or targeting for the purpose of toxic leadership behavior and its use was minimal; In the data collection process, two of 1,129 survey respondents used discussed targeting; Two of the interviewed research participants spoke of targeting; and only one discussed targeting behavior in the written statements. However, the thought or idea of the toxic behavior of targeting was discussed by an overwhelming majority of the research participants.

It was extremely apparent through the semi-structured interviews that toxic leaders, and their toxic followers, not only fully understood the power differential between themselves and the person they were targeting, but that the targeted person had limited to no options to respond to the abusive behavior (Burns, 2017). Yvette, along with many others interviewed, expressed that while toxic leaders and organizations are unfortunately frequent, not all personnel that live through the phenomenon directly experience targeting.

Yvette shared her lived experience being targeted. Yvette and a peer were adversely impacted by the same two supervisors, but both supervisors only targeted Yvette, as she was the only person to speak up about the toxic culture. Yvette suffered “daily abuse, bullying, incivility, and degrading behavior that toxic leaders perpetrate on their targets” (K. R. Williams, 2019, p. 64). The targeting behavior by the toxic managers resulted in Yvette’s health deteriorating and her eventual dismissal from the organization. Wendy’s experience was extremely similar, as her toxic manager willfully targeted individuals who did not agree with his

abusive leadership tactics and would not stop the targeting until he destroyed their careers, forced them to leave the organization, or broke them mentally or emotionally.

Zack shared that he was trying to protect several lower-level members that were not subordinate to him, which made him a target by other, and eventually his own, supervisors within the organization. The supervisors were “deliberately ruining people’s lives” of those who were targeting. Zack identified in his experience that targeting behavior became a group affair, where personnel, to include Zack’s supervisor, went “along with the group” because they were worried about being targeted themselves. Through Zack’s own observations and discussions he had with the toxic supervisors over the time he was targeted, he found that those exhibiting the behavior knew they were “not doing the right thing” but did not want to push back against others’ abusive behavior. Victor’s lived experience also reflected that the toxic manager was knowledgeable and even open about his targeting behavior as he would openly and publicly “badger, belittle, and do everything to humiliate you to a point to where you were perceived as a lower life form”.

Toxicity, The Abusive Behavior That Everyone Suffered Through Differently

The next prevalent theme, which was closely intertwined with leadership, and everywhere within this research study, was toxicity. All of the research participants conveyed the significance of toxicity and its importance to organizational culture and impact of the health and wellbeing of each participant. Toxicity is also different to each person (Pelletier, 2012) involved in toxicity, whether it is the manager, organization, followers, or the personnel impacted. However, the theme of toxicity was assumed to be the primary theme, and while it is intertwined with leadership, was the second most noted theme in this research. During the

course of data collection, some form of the word or phrase of toxicity directly appeared 307 times.

Toxicity, in the form of organizational citizenship, was repeatedly found in phrase and idea during my literature review and during the semi-structured interviews with the research participants. Oscar's long tenure in an organization initially taught him that putting people first. However, through changes in higher levels of leadership within the organization later changed the culture of financial gain at the expense of people's welfare. This went against everything that Oscar was taught in his 18 years in the organization, in which the organization and its people hold positive attitudes and are there to support and uplift one another (Hitchcock, 2015). Hope, during her own lived experience of toxicity, had a supervisor who was antithesis of supportive and the organization was quick to support the toxic supervisor, as in so many other instances that she observed and often fought against. Instead of Hope's organization investigating the issue, the organization took the word of the toxic supervisor and Hope was adversely impacted by the lack of organizational citizenship.

Toxicity, in the form of turnover of personnel, was brought up constantly during the semi-structured interviews. Upon Xavier learning about the toxicity once arriving at his organization, he immediately began looking for other employment. After a few months of Xavier's new role, an extremely toxic manager who was on another team blamed Xavier for their deficiency in productivity, for a service that Xavier was not even working for. Without investigating, the organization fired Xavier based on the word of the toxic manager. Xavier later learned that multiple employees were fired for similar issues.

Intergenerational toxicity was repeatedly found in idea during the semi-structured interviews with research participants. During Chris' lived experience, he was able to identify

that not only was the organization toxic, along with many leaders within the organization, but the toxicity was learned within the organization. The toxicity began with past managers, who indoctrinated current managers in toxic behavior and abuse. Combined with this learned behavior, the organization stood by the high-level executives and managers who were being extremely toxic and punishing those personnel who were not falling in line. Tim's experience was extremely similar where the owner of the company would not only instill toxicity into the foremen and managers but would expect them to treat their subordinates similarly.

Conforming, Colluding, Flying, Fighting, or Freezing

Searching for the response of each research participant during their lived experience was one of the pillars of this research study. It was part of the Central Research Question, specifically Sub-Question 2: "How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing?" This question was specifically asked in the online survey. Additionally, during the semi-structured interviews with the research participants, they were directly asked: "What was your response?" As stated previously in this study, there are few research studies that specifically research the response of each individual. This research study truly captured the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations, and is discussed in detail in Research Question Responses, Sub-Question 2.

Short- and Long-Term Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health

Health and long-term impact became a single topic during this research study. While there was some discussion about long-term impact on job performance during the semi-structured interviews and written statements, it was vastly overshadowed by short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health. Identifying and fully understanding the research

participant's lived experience, and the impact on their short- and long-term health was incredibly important for this research question and it was discussed in depth during the semi-structured interviews and written statements. The online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements provided an extremely detailed view of toxic leaders and organizations impact on short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health, and is discussed in detail in Research Question Responses, Sub-Question 4: "What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment?"

The Organization

The final prevalent theme, which was closely intertwined with leadership and toxicity, and everywhere within this research study, was the organization. The organization was referenced by all of the research participants during the semi-structured interviews but was not always mentioned by the word or a specific phrase. The "organization" was always a reflection of what the research participants felt was the organization, whether it was the organization as a whole, specific department or division, or even a microculture within the organization.

Additionally, how the research participants referred to the organization was by many different names. Some research participants would refer to the organization by its name, would refer it to "they", "our", or "organization", others would use "management", "headquarters", or "office", or as Zack used: "They", "them", "the unit", "leadership", and "chain of command". However, "organization" was referred to by the research participants, all of the research participants conveyed the significance and the adverse impact that the organization had on their lived experience.

In Zack's lived experience he was exceptionally clear about how toxic the organization was, how different people worked together to target or hurt him, and its overall impact on its

personnel. Zack stated that the different personnel in the top level of the organization actively worked together and “exercised their own personal and professional networks” to ruin future opportunities for him and “put the word out there that, I’m a troublemaker and that I’m a liar”. Zack also shared that the organization had “some sort of grudge or vendetta to grind against us”. During Oscar’s lived experience, he pointed out to a manager who was in the midst of violating a federal law that “it wasn’t fair to treat people like that”. The manager, and others in the organization made Oscar feel:

Ostracized from other parts of the organization. Because they didn’t agree with my view and what happened was wrong. And so I was basically like shunned. And pushed away where they didn’t want to communicate with me, they’d rather communicate with someone else, even if it was for my support.

The organization would not listen to its people and would support the toxic managers. Even if the toxic managers were found to be breaking the law or doing something immoral or unethical. When Yvette and others in her organization went to the human resources office to discuss an abusive manager and other issues, human resources made them “watch TED talks as opposed to being able to voice our concerns”. Dawn’s manager refused to listen to a reasonable issue about how managers were treating her. Instead, “from the top down, even from the owner, there was kind of this abuse of work and abuse of power” directed at her in response to Dawn’s request for better treatment. In Wendy’s lived experience, dozens of personnel filed formal and informal complaints through every process available about how toxic the culture was and unsafe the environment was because of one manager who “caused unnecessary stress at every level”, and the organization failed to respond and “nothing changed”. The organization even supported the abusive manager when he was actively and publicly:

Destroyed the careers of, multiple of my peers, fellow staff officers in his leadership, that worked for him. He also had a very disproportionate impact on people choosing to end their obligation or leave the military service.

Toxic leadership continues to be extremely “costly and irreversible outcomes which affect both individuals and the organization” (Uysal, 2019). Angela was concerned about the toxic supervisor’s actions would “be so destructive, not just to the organization, but to other good people”. Alex’s manager facilitated a culture that was “extremely toxic. People didn't know who to talk to. The whole culture of the organization was shifting very quickly. And it was a point of no return”. Rita had a similar experience when she filed a formal complaint about her abusive supervisor doing criminal acts. This supervisor “created an entire environment of retaliation, harassment, bullying, ostracization” for Rita and anyone who supported her, resulting in Rita trying all possible opportunities to leave the organization. Sam reflected on the amount of damage that his supervisor did during his lived experience, with numerous employees deciding to leave:

He would lash out at times with some of us, either at us, or he would lash out to others in front of us. He would talk crap about other managers in our own group, to other managers and obviously other managers talk to each other because we're peers. And he would say stuff that was, you know, racist or homophobic or just inappropriate in in meetings and in mixed settings. And that would get back to people. People left the company.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership at any type of organization. The

research questions elicited responses about the essence of the lived experiences to give a voice to personnel who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Research participants provided extremely thorough information through an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements of who they were before and after their lived experience. Responses to the Central Research Question and Sub-Questions are thoroughly explained below.

Central Research Question

The Central Research Question that was asked was: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations?

It was extremely important to explore the lived experience through collecting as much data as possible. With 1,129 people that participated in the research, there was a treasure trove of data that was collected. There were 1,121 people that agreed that they had a toxic manager, leader, or work in a toxic organization, with only six people who did not agree and two who provided no response. However, each of the 1,121 participants responses about their lived experiences of being adversely impacted by toxic leadership were completely unique. Some of the data from the online survey to better understand their lived experience ranged with comments like “Harmful and abusive”, “Very annoying”, “Detrimental to my health”, “I’d rather not say”, “Personal vendettas”, to multiple reports of sexual harassment, assault, and violence. While 25% more women, than men, stated that the culture at their organization was toxic, many of the women reported sexism, sexual harassment, and assault, in addition to what most males reported as toxic.

While the research participants shared their own deeply personal and unique experiences, the essence of the lived experiences were extremely similar, even though each individual’s lived experience was different. The differing experiences was due to maturity, worldview,

background, values, ethics, and morals (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016). Dawn, who was a young college student at the time of her lived experience, felt that her age, maturity, and values learned through her youth made her lived experience different than her older and more mature coworkers, as they “were adults and were not afraid to stand up for what they needed. And I would say that since I was so young, I did not have the confidence to speak up for myself”.

From this central research question, the themes and subthemes that emerged were leadership, toxic leadership, behavior, targeting, toxicity, response, health, short-term health, long-term health, long-term impact, and the organization’s response.

Sub-Question 1

The first sub question that was asked was: How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment?

The essence of how personnel were adversely impacted by the change in the culture and environment was extremely clear and undeniable. Tim, along with many others, expressed how the toxic leader and organization were committing illegal, immoral, or unethical acts with little to no accountability for their actions. Just like many others, once Tim said something about this to his supervisors and the owner of the business, the culture and environment became extremely toxic and hostile for him. Paul’s toxic supervisor was focused on “destroying programs that were successful, disrupt projects that we were working, not take any counsel”, and provided perks to those who aligned with the toxic supervisor. Xavier noticed a change in the organizational culture and their treatment towards him when he spoke up after being blamed for something that happened in another department what was not related to anything that he did. Upper management quickly made Xavier a target and he began living in the culture of fear that

he and others were now subject to. Xavier and others would brace themselves every day for abusive actions by supervisors and were eventually let go by the organization.

Just like Tim, Paul, and Xavier, Angela also encountered a change in culture similar to how “toxic leader will poison his organization by inciting deviant behaviors much in the same way a poisoned heart will deliver toxic blood to the rest of the body” (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015a). As soon as Angela’s supervisor became upset with her subordinates, she also cultivated a culture of fear by “manipulating the employees by not allowing them to talk to each other” and personnel outside of the office as there would be severe repercussions, including loss of trust.

While all 29 research participants discussed how they were impacted by the change in the culture and environment, experiences like Rita’s lived experience were examples of how organizations and leaders continued to change the environment to enable toxic supervisors to continue to harass, emotionally and physically abuse, physically assault, and rape the employee. As soon as Rita exposed that her first line supervisor raped her, her second line supervisor also “tried to force himself on me too” and she “spent the next year, trying to keep those two men” away from her. One of the impacts of Rita having to constantly live in fear for her mental, physical, and emotional safety, resulted in a productive and hardworking employee to have reduced output and become mentally and emotionally ill (Thomas et al., 2016).

Another example of how a person was impacted by the quick change in the current was that Nancy went from being “a rock star, doing everything I needed to be doing, building relationships where there hadn't been any, and increasing volunteers” to being told by people in all levels of the organization that she “was worthless, useless, and that they wanted to get rid” of her any way possible. The owner of Sam’s organization moved from supporting him and being “very friendly” since he was a “good employee” to “very volatile and explosive, and yelling and

screaming” at him. This behavior by the owner resulted in Sam leaving the organization (Thomas et al., 2016) due to the change in behavior of the top person in the organization.

From this sub question, the themes and subthemes that emerged were leadership, toxic leadership, behavior, targeting, toxicity, response, and the organization’s response.

Sub-Question 2

The second sub question that was asked was: How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing?

This question was directly asked in the online survey “What was your response: Ignored it, Conform, Collude, Fly, Fight, Freeze, or Other (With an open text box for a response)” and “What was your response?” during the semi-structured interviews. All of the research participants conveyed the significance of their response to the toxic leadership and organizations. During the online survey, most of the respondents answered with: Conform, collude, fly, fight, or freeze (Ozer et al., 2017; Padilla et al., 2007). It became evident during the first semi-structured interview that I had to add a question that was not initially planned, after the participant would discuss their lived experience in order ask what the research participant’s response was to what transpired. The research participants’ answers in the semi-structured interviews did not fit neatly in to specific one word or short phrase answers, which was comparable to several other studies on the psychological, physical, and emotional consequences where there were no final conclusions (V. Webster et al., 2016). Additionally, all 29 research participants responded in different ways when they were adversely impacted by toxic leadership in their lived experience.

In the online survey, the collected data reflected that when the 1,129 respondents were impacted by toxic leadership, 161 conformed, 41 colluded, 157 flew, 155 fought, 166 froze, 289

ignored it, and 116 marked “other”, as seen in Table 2. Many of the participants who chose other shared that their response was, as one research participant stated that it was “A combination of all of these”: conforming, colluding, flight, fighting, freezing, or ignoring. One respondent that marked “other” stated “Initially I ignored the ugly behavior and comments out of fear for my career, then I was angry and wanted to beat his ass, then I decided to leave” while another wrote “Initially I tried to conform, I then fought, arguing for particular positions and trying to reason, then I ultimately left”.

Just like the research participants who marked “other” for their response for the online survey, all 29 research participants that were involved in the semi-structured interviews did not just have one precise response during their lived experience. Alex was quick to protect his personnel from the abusive manager and then “had the moral courage to step up and do what's right for the team by making the hard call to get the manager fired” by calling the head of the organization, where an investigation was started. In Dawn’s lived experience, it first began with “just trying to fight back tears” because of the toxic manager and a few days later she stood up to her manager and told him that what he was doing was not right. Dawn then:

Called my general manager to tell her that I needed to take some time off, I told her that the environment was not healthy, and it was just adding more stress than I needed at the moment. And it was dwindling on my mental health because of how stressful the position had gotten and how I felt like I was not appreciated.

Dawn did not return to the organization out of fear that the toxicity would not only stay the same but get worse and continue to deteriorate her psychological and physical health (Dehring et al., 2018; M. Webster, 2016). Another research participant that was interviewed, Brett, stated that his “quality of life went downhill, and I was very stressed all the time and

started having hypertension during that time” and it took his declining health for a conversation to begin with the toxic manager about the extremely stressful and toxic culture. However, Luke felt like he was just irritated with the abusive supervisor and “walked out and I never looked back” but in hindsight Luke realized that his body had an involuntary response as the toxicity “affected my mood, character, social life, sleeping habits, professional satisfaction, and had me question my purpose”. Ultimately, there were 29 different answers from each of the research participants during the semi-structured interviews and similarly 1,129 varied answers to what their response was to the toxic environment and culture.

From this sub question, the themes and subthemes that emerged were toxic leadership, behavior, toxicity, response, health, and short-term health.

Table 2

Response to a Toxic Manager – Online Survey Results of Majority

Response	Count	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Employee Level
Conformed	161	Under 25: 48 30-39: 49	Male: 85	White / Caucasian: 75	Bachelor's degree: 30 Some college: 32	Entry level: 60
Colluded	41	25-29: 21	Male: 22	Asian / Pacific Islander: 11 Black / African American: 12	Some college: 10	Entry level: 13
Flew	157	Under 25: 48	Female: 96	White / Caucasian: 94	Bachelor's degree: 43	Entry level: 54
Fought	155	Under 25: 47	Female: 78	White / Caucasian: 89	Bachelor's degree: 36	An employee of more than one year at organization: 53
Froze	166	Under 25: 62	Female: 116	White / Caucasian: 109	Bachelor's degree: 40	Entry level: 68
Ignored it	289	Under 25: 132	Female: 153	White / Caucasian: 154	Some college: 68	Entry level: 143
Other	116	Under 25: 29 30-39: 30	Female: 76	White / Caucasian: 87	Bachelor's degree: 25	An employee of more than one year at organization: 36

Sub-Question 3

The third sub question that was asked was: How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment?

There were many answers provided during the semi-structured interviews and written statements about how the research participants coped during toxic cultures and abusive managers. Once the abuse began in Faith's organization, her frustration was immediate and there was no relief, especially because her subordinates and peers were leaning on her to help them as well. There was nobody for Faith to lean on or assist her. Faith was "depressed and frustrated because I felt helpless and unable to assist anyone else in their suffering". Faith "didn't go to the gym like I used to and my next fitness test scores were barely first-class scores. I spent a lot of time talking with family and friends about how I could mitigate the damage". Ian shared the difficulties in coping during his lived experience:

In a word, my world was a struggle. My ability to trust in my superiors was severely diminished, and my belief in the systems that my organization had built to eradicate toxicity and unfair practices was completely shaken. I began to withdraw. I could only maintain those relationships that were with people who also experienced the same thing I did.

Maria's coping abilities were a little bit different as she eventually lowered her expectations of those who were toxic in her organization but was always vigilant as "I found myself watching those people in the organization and how they reacted to my presence at meetings". Beth used being extremely cynical to cope during the extremely toxic environment she was in. Beth felt like she was "on an emotional roller coaster" but continuously tried

working with others to engage in problem solving and also to protect those that she felt were getting it far worse from the abusive leader than she was.

How the research participants coped and how their coping mechanisms played into their response to the toxic culture and abusive leadership was vital (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2016; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016) to truly understanding their lived experience. Ulysses' coping mechanism forced him to try to problem solve, have discussion with, and influence the supervisor to change their ways. Ulysses eventually asked for assistance, and without much change in behavior, he lowered his expectations that the supervisor would change. Ulysses and his wife would normally "have long conversations about it, usually over a glass of wine. I got heavily into running, into scuba diving to just have some outlet for stress". However, Gail had an extremely difficult time coping during her lived experience. Gail became angry and "most people who met me thought I was a total bitch" as she was trying to not only avoid the situation and issue all together, she did not want anyone to be emotionally supportive of her:

I wanted to encourage that train of thought. I did not want anyone to like me, I thought I was dirty, cursed, stupid, deserved to be unloved. I kept my head down hoping no one "saw" me. I embraced more hazardous eating disorders. The more I could become "ugly" on the outside to match what I perceived on the inside became habit forming. I made bad choice in relationships, personal and professional. I was suicidal. I hid literally under my weight. I was sick, physically and mentally. I had a couple of hospital stays, that were close calls. I literally thought "my past, my dirtiness, my stupidity was the reason GOD was punishing me, I didn't deserve to be loved and happy, I didn't deserve good things.

From this sub question, the themes and subthemes that emerged were toxic leadership, behavior, toxicity, response, health, and short-term health.

Sub-Question 4

The fourth sub question that was asked was: What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment?

Short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health were frequent topics of discussion during the semi-structured interviews and written statements by all of the research participants. Toxic organizational cultures and abusive leaders can seriously erode someone's quality of life and mental, physical, and emotional health (Burns, 2017; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016). In this research study, adverse impact on the research participants short- and long-term health were extremely evident.

Short-Term Health

Short-term health was also a major sub theme found during this research and directly responds to Sub-Question 4. All 29 of the research participants who completed their semi-structured interviews and written statements conveyed that their lived experiences adversely impacted their short-term health. Toxic culture and managers that bully and are abusive "is highly damaging to both physical and mental health" (Gardner et al., 2016) of personnel in an organization. Once the abuse began in Jenny's organization and she quickly became their target, she believed that it "led to a high stress environment which had emotional and physiological impacts, and I used to get sick to my stomach just thinking about having to deal with it". Jenny also identified that she was continuously anxious, became withdrawn and suspicious of others, and slept horribly the entire time, which she believes adversely impacted her health.

The impact on short-term health did not stop with Jenny. During Kathy's lived experience, she said that her short-term mental, physical, and emotional health was adversely impacted:

I feel like I am mostly back to my old self, but it has taken some time. During the phenomenon I was under constant stress, always thinking about the negative situation. It kept me up at night, disrupting sleep, I gained weight and was not my usual chipper and positive self. I was unhappy and unfulfilled at work and always felt a weight on my shoulders as soon as I would enter the school building. I always considered myself a very confident person, however, my confidence was definitely shaken. I didn't stand up for myself like I normally would in a situation where I felt I was wronged. I dreaded meetings, training sessions or anytime I would have to have interactions with the vindictive colleague.

Quest was able to explain her lived experience by weeks. Quest was initially "disgusted" and "had suffered authentic injustice" by the unethical, immoral, and unlawful behavior exhibited by her toxic manager. After the first few days, Quest "found it difficult to eat normally or to sleep. Quest felt as if she was "surrounded by a cloud the entire time, just going through the motions". After a few weeks, Quest was having difficulty focusing, was not even remotely optimistic about going to work or interacting with the principal, and would force herself to "smile and say "hello" every day to my principal" and others who were facilitating the toxic and abusive culture.

Charles was severely impacted by the toxic culture and leaders in his organization. Charles would become extremely anxious when he would think or encounter his job. Charles felt that his normal self was changing:

I was more bitchy following work and my need to relieve stress greatly increased. As time went on, my afterwork exercise routine (martial arts/self-defense training) became more important to reset my mood. When the COVID-19 crisis changed the work environment and the company decided to downsize, the stress level increased drastically, and this made the situation even worse. As the situation got worse, my sleep suffered. Because of my sleep cycle being impacted; my mood changed, and I became more negative and resentful.

Long-Term Health

Long-term health was also a major sub theme found during this research and directly responds to Sub-Question 4. During the semi-structured interviews and written statements, most of the research participants conveyed that their lived experiences adversely impacted their long-term health. While there is not enough academic research on unsafe and toxic organizations and abusive supervisors' impact on long-term health, it is known that adversely impacted people have reported long-term helplessness, harm, and chronic health issues (V. Webster et al., 2016). Victor found that his short-term mental, physical, and emotional health eventually became long-term health issues. He noticed that in addition to some speech problems getting worse over time:

I found that I no longer had motivation and lost the “skip in my step.” There became a feeling of people were out to get me, PTSD started to get worse from previous deployments compounding the issues making certain things unbearable. No one understood me and my brain was always somewhere else. It was impossible for me to be present all together, mind, body, and soul. There were times that I felt that I was better off dead. The impact that this type of environment has on people holds internal scars that are difficult to repair and may take years to get it to a point that it is manageable. There

are lasting effects that may never be reversed, and for some they may be permanent, or even fatal.

In addition to Victor mentioning that long-term health impact from toxic cultures and abusive managers could be fatal, Wendy noted in her written statement that several of her peers may have been contemplating suicide, to include one that wrote her own suicide note. In addition, long-term health issues presented at about the year mark as “another officer and I hit our breaking points weeks apart in July 2019, but after 1 year of working for a toxic leader day in, day out, our brains hit points that sent both of us to the ER”.

However, long-term health is not limited to one or two years, several of the research participants reported that their lived experience has adversely impacted them for decades. Emma’s lived experience happened over 30 years ago but she still suffers from the toxic supervisor and her targeting:

I noticed a change in my personality and I began to get sick more often and access more leave. I eventually developed a panic disorder which manifested as attacks consisting of heart palpitations, breathing problems, and sometimes fainting as well as contributing to elevated blood pressure. To this day, I have to still be mindful of managing my panic and can still have attacks, my sleep is disturbed because I have difficulty relaxing, and I was withdrawn socially for many years to the point that the mere thought of an upcoming social event triggered a panic response.

Gail still lives with the lived experience every day, even though it happened over 30 years ago. Gail still struggles every day, has lost many relationships because her mental and emotional health are still adversely impacted, and lives mostly in:

Survival mode. My marriage has definitely been more downs than ups. So pretty unhappy, non-trusting. I can hide things very well. I do usually fly under the wire. I really have a facade that I can erect. And you'd have to work very hard to get on the other side of that wall to actually know what has happened to me or for me to let my guard down. I do feel safe with my husband, however with thirty-two years together, it has only been the last ten years that my husband has been able to come up behind me and hug me, but never before. Even feeling safe with my husband, he could not come up behind me to hug me, or push my head, or hold me wrist even just playing around. I would disappear in my mind and go to fight/flight mode. I would be yelling and screaming. And would go into a World War Three like my brain would shut down and I would go into a complete flight or fright or fight and it wouldn't go so well. I've carried it very far with me to be 50 years old and still just barely get on the other side of the incident.

From this sub research question, the themes and subthemes that emerged were behavior, targeting, toxicity, response, health, short-term health, long-term health, and long-term impact.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four presented the results of the data analysis of the collected data. This chapter described each research participant and presented all findings from the data collected during the research study and included an individual description of every participant and their responses during the data collection process. The central research and four sub questions were used to guide this study, which allowed the researcher to understand the essence of the lived experience. Quotes from research participants' online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and written statements were used throughout the participant descriptions, themes, sub

themes, the central research question, and four sub questions. From my data analysis, five themes were identified: Leadership with toxic leadership, behavior, and targeting as sub themes; toxicity; response; health with short-term health and long-term health as sub themes; and the organization's response. A deep, rich, and thick description of each theme and subtheme was supported by quoting the participants and fully answered the central research question and three sub questions to better understand the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations. In the following chapter, I will discuss the findings and the implications through literature and theory, outline the study's delimitations and limitations, and provide my interpretation of the results. I will also provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Toxic leadership and organizations are identified as a problem in many countries. People that are adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations experience harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior which was exhibited by toxic leaders and negative environments and had severe adverse implications for personnel, such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing. By examining the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership, I hoped to provide insight and guidance into how the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and negative environments have severe adverse implications for personnel, such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing. This chapter consists of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of my research study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations. The aim of this research study was to help organizations, leaders, and personnel better understand the adverse impact of toxicity. This research provided a deep and rich description of the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and organizations in order understand the essence of the lived experience. Current and future leaders, personnel, and organizations of any type and anywhere in the world will find extremely beneficial insights from the lived experiences of all 29 research

participants and the other 1,100 people who completed the online survey. I certainly hope that leaders and organizations will learn from the participants' lived experience, rid teams and organizations of toxic culture and personnel, and that personnel adversely impacted by toxic leaders, organizations, cultures, and environments know that they are not alone in their suffering and by reviewing the lived experience of those that suffered before them, they can use this information to leave or sidestep the toxicity, or stop the toxic culture, environment, leaders, and organization from adversely impacting others.

Interpretation of Findings

I discovered five themes and five sub themes from the data analysis process that aligned with research study's Central Research Question: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations? The prevalent themes included: Leadership with toxic leadership, behavior, and targeting as sub themes; toxicity; response; health with short-term health and long-term health as sub themes; and the organization's response. The following is the summary of thematic findings with interpretations.

Summary of Thematic Findings

My research study's Central Research Question: What is the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations? The research revealed that leadership, or what was defined as toxic leadership, was identified and prevalent in organizations by almost every single respondent. The narcissistic, harmful, and bullying behavior was normally followed by no response at all or support of the toxic manager by the organization. This resulted in further targeting by the toxic managers or followers and adversely impacted personnel's morale, self-worth, self-esteem, motivation, communication, and their short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health. More women, than men, stated that the

culture at their organization was toxic, with many women additionally reporting toxic and harassing behaviors of sexism, sexual harassment, and assault. While the essence of the lived experiences was extremely similar, each individual's experience differed due to specific incidents, maturity, resilience, background, morals, and values.

The first sub question asked was: How were the personnel impacted by the change in the culture and environment? The research participants reported that toxic managers were willingly committing illegal, immoral, and unethical acts with little to no accountability for their actions. Once the research participants would become the target of the malicious or toxic behavior, the already toxic culture would become worse for them. Supervisors would target the research participants, destroy programs or projects, ignore legal or human resources counsel, and provided perks to those who aligned with or followed the toxic supervisor. Personnel would brace themselves daily from abusive actions directly against them by supervisors and others within the toxic organization. This abuse came in the form of being ignored, purposefully not being communicated to, set up to fail, trust was not extended to them, and suffered from constant harassment, emotional and physical abuse, and physical assault. Research participants frequently felt like they were worthless, useless, and lost confidence in themselves.

The second sub question that was asked was: How did each person respond to the toxic environment? Was it by conforming, colluding, flying, fighting, or freezing? This specific sub question was asked during the online survey, where each respondent answered with Ignored it, Conformed, Colluded, Flew, Fought, Froze, or with a free text response. During semi-structured interviews, the question was open ended "What was your response?" where each participant conveyed the significance of their response to the toxic leadership and organizations and but did not just have a uniformed single answer and many had multiple responses to the same lived

experience. This pattern continued through the written statement portion of the research study. Likewise, during the online survey, most of the respondents answered with conformed, flew, fought, and froze, with the majority ignoring the toxic environment. About 10 percent of the online survey respondents shared that there was a combination of two or more responses to the toxic environment. What was most interesting is that there was a population within the research study, while less than 5%, that colluded with the toxic personnel who adversely impacted the online survey respondents.

The third sub question that was asked was: How did personnel cope with the toxic leadership and the environment? The research participants provided varied direct and indirect answers during the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements about how the individuals coped and their coping mechanisms. However, while each research participant did answer this sub question, the answers were extremely varied, from critical thinking and problem solving to immense and irreparable struggle, and some participants provided that they coped differently at separate times.

The fourth sub question that was asked was: What aspects of their mental, emotional, and physical health were adversely impacted by the toxic environment? The adverse impact on research participants' mental, physical, and emotional health was extremely clear as it was brought up frequently during their semi-structured interviews and written statements. All 29 of the research participants who completed their semi-structured interviews and written statements conveyed that their lived experiences adversely impacted their short-term health. Anxiety, depression, withdrawal, physical illness, lack of focus or interest, unexplained mental, physical, and emotional health issues, and eating sleeping and disorders were some of the many prevalent short-term health issues that emerged during the research participants' lived experience. Nearly

all of the research participants conveyed that their lived experiences adversely impacted their long-term health as well, some of which has lasted over 30 years.

This research study used Max Weber's leadership theory, where leaders can positively and negatively impact subordinate satisfaction, performance, motivation, contribution, and worth (Ahmad et al., 2018; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebore, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Weber, 1922; Yukl, 1999). While Weber's leadership theory was used, this research study was not focused on proving or disproving Weber or many others' theories on leadership. The essence of Weber's leadership theory was abundant while researching the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Countless research studies have been conducted about toxic leadership and organizations, dysfunctional, and abusive leaders, and how toxic leaders impact organizations and its long-term impact (Ozer et al., 2017; Powers et al., 2016) and there are few known research studies identifying the common coping strategies of followers of a destructive leader (V. Webster et al., 2016), but there is little to no adequate research about people who have been adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This research study shines a new light on any previous theory or study, as the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations has now been studied and their voices can be truly heard for the first time.

Leadership. Every single research participant had been touched by Weber's leadership theory. All of the research participants endured bullying, a steady decline in the culture, poor team or organizational results, illegitimate sources of influence or intimidation (Aasland et al., 2010; Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011), toxicity, abuse, lack of trust, disrespect, and broken communication from the toxic manager and organization. Each research participant also suffered one or many consequences of the toxicity to include lack of motivation, knowledge,

confidence (Moore et al., 2015), reduced productivity, errors and accidents, high levels of burn-out, depression, suicide (Hernandez et al., 2018), pretending not to see or denying the toxic environment's existence, evading it, completely withdrawing from the situation, or conforming or adjusting to the changing environment (Barsky, 2014).

Every research participant directly reported or inferred that there were toxic managers or organizations encouraging and condoning deviant behavior by lower level managers or subordinates, which created or expanding the toxicity, abuse, and undesirable conditions (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015a). These managers would create silos of mistrust or would purposefully deploy others to perpetuate the abuse, toxicity, and uncertainty. Many of the toxic managers that the research participants spoke of focused on preserving the position they occupied (Thoroughgood et al., 2018; Vreja et al., 2016). These toxic managers focused on protecting their own status and also targeting those that were a threat to their role or they did not like.

All 29 of the research participants who completed their interviews conveyed that during their lived experiences other managers that were lateral or higher-level leaders within the organization were aware of the toxicity and abuse but did not intervene. In most cases other managers and high level executives were quick to back the toxic manager, dismiss the complaints of the toxicity and psychopathic behavior as not real (Boddy et al., 2015), and even attempt to shut down or get rid of the individual or group that was already being adversely impacted.

Even though there is no agreed upon definition of "toxic leader" by theorists (Green, 2014), all of the survey respondents and research participants understood what their own version or perception of what "toxic leader" or "toxicity" meant to them. Every single word and phrase

that I found during my literature review that described “toxicity”, “toxic leader”, and “toxic behavior” was confirmed during the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements. Frequently used words and phrases were: “Harmful leadership”, “abuse”, “abusive supervision”, “bullying”, “manipulation”, “control”, “public shaming”, “passive hostility”, “sabotage”, “indifference”, “negativity”, “incompetence”, and “exploitation”. It was frequently discussed during the semi-structured interviews how toxic leaders put the organization at risk (Thomas et al., 2016), did not care about the harm they inflicted on those they targeted or even the organization, were not remorseful, and would normally “double down” their “abusive” and “unethical” efforts during official complaint procedures, investigations, and official or legal enforcement (Walker & Jackson, 2017).

The Lived Experience. Where this research study diverged from past studies, this research was focused on the lived experience of personnel that were adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations and not about toxic or abusive leaders, organizations, culture, or environment. As previously stated in this study, there was immense theoretical value of this research as it filled a void in literature concerning toxic leadership and organizations by providing a clear voice to those personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and their description of the essence of the environment.

This qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study began filling a void in research of understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. This topic was and still is incredibly important to research because the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and negative environments have severe adverse implications for personnel, such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing. While there is extremely limited research and little understanding of the lived

experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership, most people will encounter toxic leadership at organizations. As proven in the literature review, there is an abundance of information on toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations, but there is a shortage of information on followers and followership literature (Thomas et al., 2016). With turning the focus to people who live the phenomenon of toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations, we can view through the lens of what adversely impacted people's natural perceptions truly are (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Ozer et al., 2017), better understanding the essence of the truly important lived experience (van Manen, 2016), a forum for those adversely impacted to be heard, and will lead to educating leaders, organizations, and followers. This is where this research study is assisting in narrowing the wide knowledge gap.

Trust. This research study corroborated and added to existing literature by adding the essence of the lived experience by those adversely impacted by toxic leadership. Trust was one of the major topics discussed during the semi-structured interviews. As Maria stated “start with trust and respect”, as trust is an essential building block that creates the framework for a positive organizational culture, the basis for quality interaction between personnel, and elevating everyone's belief in their leaders (Bulatova, 2015). Leaders must create an environment of trust and in every semi-structured interview, trust was broken at some point during the lived experience. Alex's frustration about a toxic manager's purposely not trusting anyone during his semi-structured interview showed how quickly the pulse of an organization can quickly change due to lack of trust (Burns, 2017; Ozer et al., 2017; V. Webster et al., 2016).

Decisions. Leaders' decisions were at the forefront of each semi-structured interview. The research participants were acutely aware how a leader's decision not only impacts personnel, but also the organization as a whole (Campbell et al., 2009). Paul described from his lived

experience how “decisions that were being made were really troubling” and was due to the toxic manager having no self-awareness, making these decisions on how he felt about the person, on emotion, direct or passive hostility, shaming, bullying, suspicion, and who he wanted to target next (Campbell et al., 2009; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; K. R. Williams, 2018). In every experience that the research participants discussed, the toxic manager would initially maintain self-accountability and accountability to others, but in a twisted manner of blaming the abused or suffering person. Each research participant noted directly or through their story telling, that their organizations did not follow a system of checks and balances (Campbell et al., 2009) to evaluate behavior, upholding organizational values, or how it impacted the organization and its personnel (Flynn, 2008).

Malicious, destructive, hurtful, reckless, and abusive decisions by toxic managers was also a frequent topic of discussion during the semi-structured interviews. Wendy stated during her interview that her toxic manager was very open with his beliefs of his decisions and “his way at the expense of all else, including at the expense of the good of the unit, the good of the people he’s leading, no matter who's telling him this isn't the right way”, which immensely impacted subordinates’ health, wellbeing, livelihood, and families (Campbell et al., 2009; Dehring et al., 2018; Kuoppala et al., 2008; Uysal, 2019; V. Webster et al., 2016). Ian shared that his toxic supervisor “had the strength to just shut him down completely in no uncertain terms” with how much she could control and bring others that were targeted down with her malicious decisions (Pathak, 2017). In every research participant’s lived experience, the toxic leader made incredibly harmful, yet purposeful decisions that were intended to reduce subordinates’ morale, self-worth, self-esteem, motivation, trust, communication, and cooperation (Burns, 2017; Chamberlain &

Hodson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2016; Powers et al., 2016) and were catastrophic for the organization and its personnel.

Manipulating Laws. All 29 research participants agreed that in addition to malicious decisions, toxic leaders were manipulating laws, rules, policies, and regulations in order to further their tactics. Organizations normally create regulations and policies for the betterment of the organization, its mission, and personnel (Rodriguez & Brown, 2016), however, the research participants were clear that the toxic leaders not only willfully disobeyed the letter of the regulations, policies, and rules, but also its spirit (Hanson & Baker, 2017). Quest explained that her supervisor frequently “made up rules as she went along, which had worked for her” benefit in strengthening her own position, further targeting personnel, and creating further havoc (Hanson & Baker, 2017; Powers et al., 2016). Rita shared that toxic leaders thrive in that environment because the toxic leader is normally the one “who picks and chooses who to apply the laws and rules to”, which is extremely detrimental to the adversely impacted personnel both in the short and long-term (Matos et al., 2018; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). When psychopathic leaders manipulate laws, rules, and regulation, it not only adversely impacts those they are targeting, but also significantly hurt the organization in the long run.

This research study differed from past studies discussing toxic leadership, abusive leaders, organizations, culture, or environment and was solely focused on the lived experience of personnel that were adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations. There was vast empirical value of this research as it filled a void in literature concerning the adverse impact of toxic leadership and organizations. This was filled by survey respondents and research participants providing a clear voice of their adversely impacted lived experience in conjunction with the literature that was reviewed during this research study.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The practical value of this research provides greater insight for leaders of organizations and those who may experience a toxic, destructive, or hostile environment or organizational culture. There were no surprises during the literature review and research to understand the essence of the lived experience, and reinforced that toxic and abusive leaders and organizations are “unconcerned with the consequences of their actions” (Walker & Jackson, 2017, p. 800). The essence of the lived experience helped me understand the thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and actions by those who were adversely impacted by toxic leadership, culture, and organizations. This research study will hopefully help keep personnel safe against toxic leadership and organizations by understanding the phenomenon through the lived experience, but it will not remove the threat of hostile, psychopathic, or toxic leaders or culture. These implications for policy and practice section will guide leaders, stakeholders, and organizations to understand the impact on adversely impacted personnel’s short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health, influencing positive change within an organization, and providing a safe and neutral way for personnel within an organization to voice concerns, problems, or identifying toxicity.

Toxic leader’s adverse impact on personnel’s short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health was one of the most discussed topics during the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements. All of the research participants’ health was adversely impacted in both the short- and long-term. However, each research participant has been adversely impacted since their lived experience and are still suffering from mental, physical, and emotional health issues, even after four decades since the lived experience, or they have permanently adjusted aspects of their lives to protect themselves from further harm or suffering.

It was repeatedly shown throughout the literature review and the research study that toxic culture, leaders, and organizations detrimentally impacted the targeted “worker, co-workers, and potentially the entirety of the organization in which it took place” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 1). All stakeholders must acknowledge the severity of the lifelong adverse impact of toxic leadership and organizations on its personnel, and even the short- and long-term “systemic harm to the health of an organization, impairing the organization from meeting its mission” (Green, 2014, p. 18). Additionally, those who have been adversely impacted by toxic leadership can know that this research study proves that they are not alone as many others have had the same or similar lived experience.

Another frequently discussed topic was changing the environment and empowering personnel. Leaders cannot sit idly by while toxic managers are abusing and targeting subordinates. Supportive leaders must attempt to influence change at the highest possible levels (Betlejeski, 2017; Gunderman, 2015; Roter, 2011). In order to influence this change, stakeholders must include legitimate training and education. This training would separately be for all groups: Executive leaders, managers, and subordinates. This training and education cannot be a half-hearted effort and must help each group understand their roles in a toxic environment and culture, identifying the different circumstances contributing to the issue, and how to influence positive change. Providing the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations in the training will help people in all levels of an organization understand the impact of the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by the toxic leaders. The benefits are not only for subordinate personnel in an organization, but “are significant in terms of safety, service, organizational performance, and the bottom line” (Kusy & Holloway, 2014, p. 303), which may help influence those that do not

necessarily believe or understand the immense impact that toxic and abusive cultures, leaders, environments, climates, and organizations can have on its personnel.

Lastly, all of the research participants indicated that there was not a safe way to voice their concerns when there is a toxic culture. When toxic managers, who already lead with ego, receive a complaint from personnel within their organization, it can be difficult to discern genuine issue with personal attack. Conversely, if the individual believes the complaint is not being heard or received, the adversely impacted individual continues to not trust the manager and organization and feel even more isolated. Additionally, if adversely impacted personnel feel that leaders within their organization were “not authentic in seeking out the views of personnel but were only going through the motions” (Boddy, 2017, p. 145) in listening to the issues that were voiced, it will further contribute to the feeling of not being safe, trusted, or taken seriously, thus continuing the toxicity. Stakeholders must ensure that their organizations have a safe and neutral way for their personnel to voice concerns, without the retaliation and retribution that is frequently involved when someone voices legitimate concerns about toxic leadership or culture.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This hermeneutic phenomenological research study is to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership for the participants at any type of organization. This research described the essence of the phenomenon and gave voice to those who were adversely impacted by toxic and destructive leadership. Having this description, or essence of the lived experience is extraordinarily important (van Manen, 2016) as better understanding leads to educating leaders, organizations, and followers. This is where there are immense theoretical and empirical implications as there is extremely limited academic research and very little understanding of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic

leadership. The information in this research study and in this particular section will help provide a better picture to those who belong to organizations, organizations themselves, leaders, and academia to influence change in organizations and the way they lead.

Theoretical

The theoretical value of this research fills a gap in literature about toxic leadership and organizations by providing a clear voice to those personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and their description of the essence of the environment. This research study used Max Weber's leadership theory, where leaders can positively and negatively impact subordinate satisfaction, performance, motivation, contribution, and worth (Ahmad et al., 2018; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Rebore, 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2016; Weber, 1922; Yukl, 1999) as this was the only theory that remotely aligned with my research study. My research study was not focused on proving or disproving Weber's leadership theory or many others' theories on leadership. Nevertheless, the essence of each research participant's lived experience did align with the essence of Weber's leadership theory and also contributed to the theory.

It is true that countless research studies have been conducted about toxic leadership and organizations, abusive and dysfunctional treatment, and how toxic leaders impact organizations and its long-term impact (Ozer et al., 2017; Powers et al., 2016). There are also a few known research studies identifying the common coping strategies of followers of a destructive leader (V. Webster et al., 2016). However, there is little to no adequate research about people who have been adversely impacted, both short and long-term, by toxic leadership.

My research shines a new light in an area with scarce research and theory outside of Weber's leadership theory and many others' theories on leadership. The essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations has been

effectively researched during this study but there is not a theory that the results directly correlate to, whether it is leadership or even trauma theories. For example, during Rita's semi-structured interview, she describes criminal behavior, rape, sexual assault, drugging, toxicity, abusive culture, suicide, leadership, trauma, values, narcissism, sociopaths, psychopaths, gaslighting, a legal system that protected abusers, and the short- and long-term impact on mental, physical, and emotional health which all were part of her lived experience and similar to all of the research participants' lived experiences. I found no theories that fully reflected the impact of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leaders, leadership, and organizations. I provide a new theory based on this research: Toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations can directly and adversely impact people's mental, physical, and emotional health for a lifetime.

Empirical

The empirical value of this research has implications for stakeholders in any organization. Considerable research was previously conducted on toxic leaders, cultures, and organizations, but there was little or no research that gave a voice to personnel who were adversely impacted by toxic leadership. While there was very little to no research on the lived experience of those who were adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations, the results of the research study were in line with research about toxic leaders and organizations, where toxic leaders and organizations can easily get away with abusing personnel, deflecting blame, and adversely impacting personnel (van Rooij & Fine, 2018). There were no surprises during the empirical research. Throughout this empirical implications section, citations will help illustrate not only the importance of this research study's online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements providing a plethora of empirical information for current and

future stakeholders, but to help current and future stakeholders better understand the essence of the lived experience.

Illegitimate sources of influence were frequently discussed by the research participants during the semi-structured interviews. When toxic leaders would use illegitimate sources of influence or intimidation, such as personality, power, and their positions (Aasland et al., 2010; Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011), it would always result in poor performance of the organization over the term of the toxicity and would lead to less productivity, errors, accidents, burn-out, depression, and anxiety, and other mental, emotional, or physical health problems. Silos of mistrust created organizational uncertainty and mistrust within the organizations. All of the toxic managers were focused on preserving or enhancing the position they occupied (Thoroughgood et al., 2018; Vreja et al., 2016) instead of the organization's mission or other priorities. The illegitimate and toxic influence was not stopped and continued to grow until it infected the entire organization.

There were dozens of phrases that were used to discuss toxicity during the entire research study. While there was no definition of "toxic leader" that is agreed upon by theorists (Green, 2014), the research participants each had their own ideas and perceptions of what phrases like "toxicity", "toxic leader", and "toxic culture" were. Harmful leadership, abusive supervision, bullying, manipulation, control, incivility, shaming, passive hostility, team sabotage, indifference, negativity, and exploitation (K. R. Williams, 2017) were some of the examples of toxicity. Toxicity was found at all levels of an organization and the toxic leaders did not care about the harm they inflicted on others. Additionally, there was always a lack of action that created an even worse situation along with a lack of accountability and checks and balances that enabled the toxicity.

Toxic leaders not only tore down the environment of trust but built silos and even a culture of mistrust. When the culture of mistrust was identified, it added to the other visible toxic issues within the organization: Uncertainty, lack of productivity, commitment, sharing of information, knowledge creation, changes in perception, forming alliances, self-preservation, and diminished efficiency (Chung & Jackson, 2011). In all of the research participants' lived experiences, it was found that if the toxic leader was informed that they were not trusted by their subordinates, it quickly led to them targeting, isolating, and bullying individuals.

Toxic leaders' decisions were made that did not reflect the organization's principles, value dignity, lawful, just, fair, truthful, moral, or ethical (Mowchan et al., 2015; Ozer et al., 2017; Powers et al., 2016; K. R. Williams, 2018). The toxic managers did not hold themselves or let others hold them accountable for the toxic, abusive, and dysfunctional decisions they made. All of the decisions by toxic managers immensely impacted people's health, wellbeing, livelihood, were used for control, and were catastrophic for personnel and the organization as a whole, and forced all personnel within the organization to be "under tremendous stress due to turmoil within the organization, unable to effectively deal with it, and all were likely to experience high levels of stress and confusion" (Gavin et al., 2017, p. 4). These results were not only found in my literature review but also in all phases of my research study: Online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements.

During the entire research study, the research participants and those who completed the online survey discussed their response during the lived experience, which was fighting, flying, freezing, or a combination of the three. Each person in the research study responded to the behaviors they perceived as harmful, destructive, volatile, manipulative, narcissistic, abusive,

intimidating, and bullying (V. Webster et al., 2016). This natural response was due to the extreme toxicity, abuse, and dysfunction by the toxic leaders and organizational culture.

Toxic followers were also discussed by the research participants. While none of the research participants became toxic followers, they did see how some people, many times peers, quickly become agents for the toxic regime (Allahverdyan & Galstyan, 2016), were only concerned for themselves, and contributed to the extremely toxic and abusive culture. The toxic followers did everything to conform or collude with the toxic leader and did everything possible to ensure that they did not become the target of the dysfunctional leader.

Limitations and Delimitations

When I first began this research, I wanted to include everyone, 18 years of age or older, who had been adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations and did not want to limit it due to location, geography, or nationality. I wanted to truly understand the essence of the lived experience. For several years, I was trying to find a way to make this research study fully remote but could not find a way to perform all of the needed aspects of the semi-structured interviews, especially observing the research participant's body language, hand gestures, emotion, and other desired observations that would assist in better understanding the phenomenon. However, due to social distancing, quarantining, and unknown risk to me and the research participants' health due to COVID-19, I chose to perform all aspects of my research study remotely. All of the research participants' semi-structured were conducted over the phone and not by video in order to ensure each research participant's anonymity and safety. While I was not able to visually observe the research participants during the semi-structured interviews, I was still able to capture the essence of lived experience through verbal cues, voice inflection, cries, laughs, and through the online surveys and written statements.

Through my literature research, development of my dissertation, creating the main research question and sub-questions, I began developing my online survey questions. During the development of the online survey questions, I was able to capture all types of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations. However, I did not ask any direct questions about toxic followership, which would have provided additional data for this and future research studies.

In development of the idea for my research, I first had to find the best methodology and designs that would fully capture what I wanted to truly research. I immediately chose a qualitative instead of a quantitative methodology as I was trying to understand the lived human experience and qualitative methodology best represented this with its five designs: Phenomenology, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology was selected for my research design. Additionally, I needed a descriptive interpretation of the essence of the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations, which is where the hermeneutic phenomenological design was selected as its definitions are descriptive, phenomenological, and interpretive, hermeneutic methodology (van Manen, 2016). However, hermeneutic phenomenology has its own benefits and pitfalls as this methodology and design assumes that the researcher has bias. Since I encountered the same phenomenon, the bias assisted me in understanding the participants' experiences (Schwandt, 2015) but I had to continuously be aware of the probability that I could have interpreted a research participant's own lived experience through my own lens, which thankfully I did not.

Before I began my data collection, I was fearful that I would have an extremely small sample size. With a small sample size, the data could have had different results due to the small

collection pool. However, due to the power of social media and my online survey was easy to find, I was able to generate a large sample size in the online survey and with the number of research participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this research study, the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations, provided an understanding of the lived experience but future research still needs to be conducted in order to help people in all levels of an organization, and even those adversely impacted by toxic leadership, understand the impact of the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by the toxic leaders. The short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health of those adversely impacted by toxic leadership must be further studied with qualitative methodology and a phenomenological design. Toxic followership must also be researched further in a qualitative study as it is a direct consequence of toxic leadership, culture, and environment.

During the semi-structured interview with Chris, he discussed “intergenerational toxicity” being a frequent issue at the large corporation where he encountered his lived experience. His definition of intergenerational toxicity was where managers teach, normalize, and condone toxic behavior to their subordinates, and those subordinates repeat the cycle with future generations. While I am extremely knowledgeable of this idea and theory, there is little to no academic research discussing this phenomenon and there must be further research, academic agreement of a definition, and a further refined theory. Beth discussed “mobbing” and “gaslighting” at lengths during her semi-structured interview. While there is academic research on both topics, it only begins to scratch the surface when it applies to toxic leadership, culture, and environment.

Lastly, there needs to be in-depth qualitative and phenomenological academic research into the disparity of perceptions of toxicity between an organization and the person being adversely impacted. The organizations that were discussed during the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements were frequently viewed by the adversely impacted person as writing off the situation, or worse, were doing everything in their power to hurt the person. Conducting this research and discussing it in an academic setting will greatly help stakeholders better understand how toxicity impacts organizations and its personnel.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership. All 29 of the research participants were adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations. The participants in this research revealed that toxic leadership, culture, and environment adversely impacted personnel's morale, self-worth, self-esteem, motivation, communication, and their short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health. More women, than men, stated that the culture at their organization was toxic, with many women additionally reporting toxic and harassing behaviors of sexism, sexual harassment, and assault. While the essence of the lived experience was extremely similar for all 29 participants of this study, each individual's experience differed due to specific incidents, maturity, resilience, background, morals, and values. This research study is significant as this area had not been specifically studied and many researchers recommended that new research should be conducted.

In addition to understanding the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership and organizations, this research revealed what a toxic leader's adverse impact on personnel's short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health as this was one of the

most discussed topics during the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and written statements. Every research participant's short- and long-term mental, physical, and emotional health was adversely impacted, with all of the participants still being adversely impacted since their lived experience and are still suffering from mental, physical, and emotional health issues, even after four decades since the lived experience, or they have permanently adjusted aspects of their lives to protect themselves from further harm or suffering. There are enormous personal and lifelong costs for those who are adversely impacted by toxic leaders, culture, environments, and organizations, and stakeholders who belong to organizations, organizations themselves, leaders, and academia must act now and positively influence change in organizations and the way they lead.

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Appendix A: Survey for Data Collection

Are you 18 years old or older?

What is your gender: Decline to respond, Male, Female, Non-conforming

What industry are you in?

Have you ever had a toxic manager?

How old were you at the time of the phenomenon: Decline to respond, Under 25 years old, 25-29, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, or 90s.

What was your level of education at the time of the phenomenon: Decline to respond, Attended secondary school, Graduated secondary school, Some college, Associates or two year degree, Up to four years of college, Bachelor's or four year degree, Master's or advanced degree, Some post graduate studies or completed post graduate certificate, or Completed doctoral studies.

What type of relationship were you in at the time of the phenomenon: Single, Partner, Fiancé, Married, Separated, Divorced, or Widowed/Widower.

How many children did you have at the time of the phenomenon?

What was your position in the organization at time of phenomenon: Entry level, Tenured employee, Lower level manager, Middle level manager, or High level manager.

In a few sentences, how would you describe the experience?

What was your response: Ignored it, Conform, Collude, Fly, Fight, Freeze, or Other (With an open text box for a response).

Can the researcher contact you so you can be interviewed and share your experience? (If marked "no", that will be the end of the survey. If it is marked "yes", the next prompt appears)

What is your email address (This information will only be shared with the researcher and you will be contacted if you indicated that you would like to share your story)?

Appendix B: Email and Text Message Recruitment Letter for Data Collection

Dear (Enter Name Here),

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as the final phase of the requirements for a Doctorate of Education. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experience of personnel who are adversely impacted by toxic leadership. I am writing you with the hopes that you will participate in my study. The only requirement is that each participant must be at least 18 years old.

The validity of this research study is extremely important to me and those who will read the study, so I hope that you will take the time to participate and forward this message to anyone else you believe would be interested in assisting in my research. Every participant will remain anonymous and can opt out of the research at any time. The research will be in three parts:

- Online survey – This survey will be a minimum of four questions and will remain completely anonymous unless you chose to provide your email address to be contacted for an interview.
- Consent form – If you indicated interest and meet the minimum requirements for the interview phase, I will contact you to coordinate an interview. However, I will first send you a consent form. This form will ensure you understand all of the rules and scope of the study, your rights and option to opt out any time, an outline of each step of the process, and of course your consent.
- Interview – Once the consent form is completed, I will contact you to coordinate an interview. The interview will take place at a location that is most comfortable and safe for you and the audio of the interview will be recorded.

- Statements consisting of descriptions of what you were like before the experience in a toxic environment and what you were like during your experience in a toxic environment – Each of these short statements should only take a few minutes to write and will be used to find common themes that will be critical to the research.
- Member checking – While this is the final step, it is the most critical step as I want to ensure that the information I received from you, my analysis of the data, and my conclusions are accurate and reflective of what you provided. I will send you the written transcript for your review and any edits that you desire to make.

If you would still like to participate, please visit (Survey website link here). If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your assistance and support!

Sincerely,

Jeremy Piasecki

Appendix C: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 9, 2020

Jeremy Piasecki
Russell Yocum

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-401 THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PERSONNEL ADVERSELY IMPACTED BY TOXIC LEADERSHIP: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Jeremy Piasecki, Russell Yocum:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

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

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix D: Consent Agreement

Consent

Title of the Project: The Lived Experience of Personnel Adversely Impacted by Toxic Leadership

Principal Investigator: Jeremy B. Piasecki, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years old. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to better understand what the lived experience of personnel adversely impacted by toxic leadership of organizations is. This topic is important to study because the harassment, bullying, and narcissistic behavior exhibited by toxic leaders and negative environments have severe adverse implications for people, such as reduced accomplishments, mental health, lack of trust, and overall wellbeing.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in a 60 minute, one-on-one interview with me. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing recommendations and rules, all interviews will be conducted telephonically or by a secure video conference service. The interview will be recorded but will remain confidential.
- Write a brief statement of what you were like prior to your experience. A description of your mood, character, social life, sleep habits, professional satisfaction, and what your “typical behavior” was on a daily basis. There is no minimum or maximum length or time that this exercise needs to be, but 300-500 words or about 5-10 minutes of writing will be enough.
- Write a brief statement of what you were like during or after your experience. A description of your mood, character, social life, sleep habits, professional satisfaction, and what your “typical behavior” was on a daily basis. There is no minimum or maximum length or time that this exercise needs to be, but 300-500 words or about 5-10 minutes of writing will be enough.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the findings and conclusions reached by me and to provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided. This will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, an indirect benefit you may encounter is talking through your lived experience may provide you with some comfort, understanding, or closure to what may have been an uncomfortable time for you.

Benefits to society include truly understanding people's perceptions, reality, how the negative and adverse environment and leaders impacted them, their feelings, and how or if they were able to cope. This may create opportunities for organizations and its leaders to better understand what personnel in toxic environments are up against and may result in the managers to become better leaders.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted over the phone or online, in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jeremy B. Piasecki. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]

or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Russ Yocum at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [REDACTED].

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Type name here

Insert date here