

Toxic Leadership: A Phenomenological Investigation of Recently Retired U.S. Army Service  
Members' Experiences with Toxic Leaders

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### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study investigates the experiences of recently retired U.S. Army service members with toxic leadership. The study involved a sample of 10 participants, with data collection conducted through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Interviews for the study were conducted face-to-face or through virtual platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, with each session lasting no longer than 90 minutes. Data analysis employed a six-step thematic analysis method, with coding completed through NVivo after initial hand-coding. Findings revealed that the military culture, characterized by strict hierarchy and obedience, inadvertently fosters an environment conducive to toxic leadership. Participants reported that the lack of accountability for abusive leaders and the suppression of subordinates' voices enable toxic behavior. The study highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing toxic leadership within the military. Given the distinct and rigid nature of military rank structures and chain of command, altering an established hierarchy presents challenges. However, the research suggests that fostering leadership styles that highlight authentic and transformational qualities could lead to a more positive and professional military environment.

*Keywords:* toxic leadership, counterproductive leadership, U.S. Army service members

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
List of Tables.....	9
List of Figures.....	10
List of Abbreviations.....	11
Chapter One: Introduction.....	12
Overview.....	12
Background.....	12
Situation to Self.....	14
Problem Statement.....	15
Purpose Statement.....	16
Significance of the Study.....	17
Research Questions.....	17
Definitions.....	18
Summary.....	19
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	21
Overview.....	21
Theoretical Framework.....	23
Toxic Triangle: The Dark Triad.....	24
Application of the Dark Triads to this Study.....	29
Related Literature.....	29

Early Research on Leadership Models .....	29
Leadership Styles.....	33
Leadership Qualities and Toxic Leadership Behaviors .....	48
Subjectiveness in Defining Toxic Leadership .....	49
Reasons for Toxic Leadership Behaviors .....	51
Toxic Leadership Impact on Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Performance	52
Toxic Leader Impact on Employee Retention and Turnover Intent .....	55
Military Leader Propensity for Toxicity.....	56
Current Military Doctrine on Prevention and Protection from Toxic Leaders.....	57
Gaps in the Literature .....	59
Summary .....	60
Chapter Three: Methods .....	64
Overview.....	64
Design.....	64
Research Questions.....	67
Setting .....	67
Participants.....	68
Procedures.....	69
The Researcher's Role.....	69
Data Collection .....	70
Interviews .....	71
Data Analysis .....	71
Trustworthiness.....	73

Credibility .....	73
Dependability and Confirmability .....	74
Transferability.....	74
Ethical Considerations .....	75
Summary .....	75
Chapter Four: Findings .....	77
Overview.....	77
Participants.....	77
AJ .....	78
CSM .....	78
Fred .....	79
George.....	79
Jessica .....	79
JJ .....	80
JT.....	80
Owen .....	80
Sarah .....	81
Tex .....	81
Results.....	82
Theme Development.....	82
Research Question Responses .....	100
Summary .....	102
Chapter Five: Conclusion .....	104

Overview.....	104
Summary of Findings.....	104
RQ1 Responses .....	105
RQ2 Responses .....	105
Discussion.....	106
The Structure and Hierarchy of the Military Culture .....	107
Leadership Style and Self-Centered Behavior.....	110
Leaders Exhibit Oppressive Misuse of Authority .....	112
Leadership Style and Manipulative Behavior.....	112
Lasting Effects of Toxic Leadership in the Military .....	113
Toxic Leadership and Suicide in the Army .....	115
Toxic Leadership and Team Dynamics .....	116
Implications.....	118
Theoretical Implications .....	118
Empirical Implications.....	120
Practical Implications .....	121
Delimitations and Limitations.....	122
Recommendations for Future Research .....	122
Summary.....	125
References.....	127
Appendix A: List of Codes .....	148
Appendix B: IRB Approval .....	150
Appendix C: Recruitment Materials .....	151

Appendix D: Questionnaire .....152

Appendix E: Reflective Journal .....153

Appendix F: Information consent .....156

Appendix G : Interview questions.....161



**List of Tables**

Table 1 Sample Codes .....	83
Table 2 Emergent Themes .....	84
Table 3 Superordinate Themes .....	85

**List of Figures**

Figure 1 Toxic Triangle ..... 24

Figure 2 Three Corners of the Dark Triad ..... 25

**List of Abbreviations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Noncommissioned officer (NCO)

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Overview**

Toxic leadership is a prevalent issue for many organizations, as it is not an industry-specific phenomenon (Van, 2019). The adverse outcomes of toxic leadership are felt by followers as well as internal and external stakeholders and the organization as a whole (Van, 2019). However, the experiences of toxic leadership among Army service members have remained understudied (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). More research is needed to explore how the toxic leadership style affects military members' well-being and performance (Van, 2019). This study defines toxic leadership as a type of leadership in which leaders' behaviors inflict physical or psychological harm on their subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). Chapter One provides an introduction that includes the topic's background, the researcher's relationship to the subject, a statement of the problem, the study's purpose, its significance, the research questions, and the definitions relevant to the study. It concludes with a summary of the chapter.

### **Background**

Toxic leadership is a new construct that arose from U.S. military research (Fosse et al., 2019; Winn & Dykes, 2019). Specifically, Army researchers studying the occurrence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide among Army service members began to look at potential external contributing factors such as counterproductive leadership (Van, 2019; Winn & Dykes, 2019). These researchers found that some leaders were engaging in destructive behaviors, acting in their best interests and not those of their Army subordinates. Their destructive behaviors were labeled *toxic* (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

Toxic leadership is characterized by the following:

1. An obvious lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates
2. An interpersonal style or personality that adversely impacts the organizational atmosphere
3. A perception among subordinates that personal interests largely drive the leader (Reed, 2004, p. 67). Toxic leaders have a detrimental effect on organizational culture, as their unethical behavior undermines both their own integrity and the Army's core values (Johnson, 2018).

Existing literature regarding adverse outcomes from toxic leadership focuses on public and private sector organizations, with little research published on toxic leadership in the military (Brandebo et al., 2019; Kayani & Alasan, 2021). Subsequent investigations and research into the causes of toxic leadership are as widespread as the definitions. An overriding question asked by military experts was why military leaders exhibit these leadership behaviors that undermine their organization and affect soldiers' well-being.

Researchers found that military leaders in positions of great responsibility brought on an inflated ego (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019; Green, 2020). A common reason for these toxic behaviors was a perceived threat to the leaders' status, power, or control. This perceived threat prompted a leader to become defensive while harboring a sense of vulnerability in their leadership abilities (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019; Green, 2020). Green (2020) explored how personal issues can alter military leaders' behavior, potentially resulting in harmful actions. The research by Green (2020) suggests that the mood of these leaders significantly impacted how they behaved toward their staff. Furthermore, leaders who demonstrated unhealthy behaviors shared common characteristics, notably ethical failure, incompetence, and neurosis (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019).

Researchers have claimed that self-awareness programs, early training requirements for Army leaders, and supportive counseling are in place to prevent counterproductive and toxic leadership behaviors (Horval, 2020; Saleem et al., 2021). However, Army Regulation 600-100 states that officers or other leaders must examine themselves and determine if their behavior is toxic (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017). When making this determination based solely on their perceptions, military leaders often overlook harmful leadership behaviors and claim that abrasive behavior is an acceptable part of military training (Matsuda, 2014). The adverse effects of toxic leadership on Army service members remain unknown in the literature.

### **Situation to Self**

The current gap in the literature and its associated consequences motivated me to conduct this study. Moreover, I have experienced incidences of toxicity throughout my military service. The research paradigm that aligns with this study is constructivist interpretivism. The central purpose of the interpretivist paradigm is to gain insight into subjective human experiences (Myers, 2019). Under this paradigm, researchers try to understand a phenomenon through participants' viewpoints and interpretations of the world around them, thus operating under a subjectivist epistemology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Interpretivism in the context of phenomenology comes from Husserl, who argued that individuals' experiences matter in terms of their interpretations of those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). However, according to Husserl those experiences have an underlying universality that can be accessed through careful analysis (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), Heidegger disagreed with Husserl. Heidegger insisted that the contexts of experiences shape individuals' perspectives. Since each individual's situation differs from the other, interpretations must be assessed individually to achieve any transcendent understanding of the broader phenomenon.

Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed (Myers, 2019). A subjectivist epistemological assumption I brought to this study was that I could make meaning of interview data through my cognitive processes and other information gathered from participants during interactions (Barbehön, 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The social framework provides a context for legitimizing hierarchies while forming groups, which is a more localized process that involves distinguishing one group from another through specific behaviors. Such behaviors are based on the various concepts of constructivism (Barbehön, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm allows me to understand that while an individual's reality is subjective based on that individual's experiences, it is formed through social constructs (Myers, 2019). My perceptions are relative to my environments and experiences (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). I bring a relativist ontological assumption to this study, meaning that I believe that multiple realities can be linked to a phenomenon and that these realities can be identified. The study aims to discover the value and meaning of these realities through interactions between the participants and me (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem is that toxic leadership remains in the military despite the plethora of research showing how to detect and remedy this form of destructive behavior (Fosse et al., 2019). The prevalence of toxic leadership in any organization can cause a range of adverse outcomes for the organization and its employees, including low morale, poor job performance, reduced effectiveness, and decreased psychological, socioemotional, and physical well-being (Burns, 2017). The specific problem is that the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes among Army service members are unknown (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

There is a gap in the literature; despite research focusing on detecting and avoiding toxic leadership, few studies have explored recently retired U.S. Army service members' experiences with toxic leadership. I know from my own military experience that instances of harmful behaviors are reproached throughout the Army's formations. However, due to the militarized nature of the Army, toxicity remains prevalent within the Army's ranks because these occurrences are not easily identified or criticized.

Further research is needed on the adverse outcomes of counterproductive leadership from the perspectives of Army service members (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Johnson (2018) recommended future research on soldiers' experiences of toxic leadership in the Army. Similarly, Walker and Watkins (2020) suggested that more research is needed to understand better the experiences of toxic leadership in the military context. Finally, Fosse et al. (2019) indicated the need for qualitative research exploring military members' experiences with destructive forms of leadership, such as toxic leadership. Addressing this gap in the literature is essential because the adverse outcomes associated with toxic leadership may be different for Army service members than civilians. Army service members are contractually bound and cannot resign from their positions, whereas civilians have the liberty to do so (Van, 2019). Exploring the experiences of toxic leadership among Army service members can provide support service personnel with insights, resulting in tailored interventions for personnel suffering from the consequences of toxic leadership.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe recently retired U.S. Army service members' experiences serving under toxic leaders. In this study, toxic leadership is characterized as leadership in which leaders' behaviors inflict physical or psychological harm on



their subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). The theory guiding this study is Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triangle, also known as the dark triad. This theory explains the fundamentals of toxic leadership related to narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy and emphasizes how these three characteristics in a leader can affect followers.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in that it addresses a gap in the literature. There is a gap in the literature in that while research has focused on detecting and avoiding toxic leadership, few studies have explored the experiences of toxic leadership (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Further research on the adverse outcomes of harmful leadership from Army service members' perspectives is needed to close the literature gap.

Addressing this gap in the literature is critical because the adverse outcomes associated with toxic leadership may be different for Army service members than civilians because Army service members cannot resign from their positions as civilians can (Van, 2019). Furthermore, addressing this gap in the literature is significant because subordinates experiencing toxic leadership can be cynical toward the whole organization because they view their leaders as representatives of the organization (Dobbs & Do, 2019). Exploring the experiences of toxic leadership among Army service members may help support service personnel tailor interventions for those suffering from the consequences of harmful leadership (Walker & Watkins, 2020). Additionally, the results of this study may help spread awareness of the existence of toxic leadership in the military and its adverse impact on Army service members.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions guided this study. The first research question is:

**RQ1:** What are the experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members?

The first research question focuses on recently retired U.S. Army service members' experiences with toxic leadership. This focus aligns with the first part of the problem the study aims to address: The experiences of toxic leadership among Army service members are unknown (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

**RQ2:** What are the perceived adverse outcomes derived among recently retired U.S. Army service members and their experiences with toxic leadership?

The second research question focuses on recently retired U.S. Army service members' experiences with adverse outcomes associated with toxic leadership. This focus aligns with the second part of the problem the study aims to address: The adverse effects of toxic leadership and the lived experiences are unknown among Army service members' (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). The participants' lived experiences can speak to how toxic leaders continue to go unchecked.

### **Definitions**

1. Machiavellianism is a personality trait defined by manipulative behaviors, deceitfulness, lack of empathy, cynical views, and a general mistrust of others (Triantoro et al., 2020).
2. *Narcissism* – Narcissism in leaders refers to potentially harmful behaviors, including pridefulness, egotism, lack of empathy, and grandiosity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tiwari & Jha, 2022). Narcissists have an entitlement attitude and believe that society owes them something because they are in a position of superiority (Baloyi, 2020).
3. *Psychopathy* – Psychopathy refers to a personality trait characterized by superficial charm, high regard for self, deceitfulness, and egocentric behaviors (Maung, 2021).

4. *Toxic leadership* – Toxic leadership is described as the type of leadership in which leaders' behaviors inflict physical or psychological harm on their subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). Additionally, toxic leadership is characterized by harm perpetrated on an organization's stakeholders through destructive and manipulative actions (Hinen, 2019; Kiritu, 2018).

### **Summary**

The general problem is that there remains a relatively high prevalence of toxic leadership in the military despite the plethora of research showing how to detect and remedy this form of destructive leadership (Fosse et al., 2019). The prevalence of toxic leadership in any organization can cause a variety of adverse outcomes for the organization and its employees, including low morale, poor job performance, reduced effectiveness, and decreased psychological, socioemotional, and physical well-being (Burns, 2017). The specific problem is that the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes among Army service members are unknown (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

This interpretive phenomenological research study explored the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interpretive lens guiding the study is influenced by van Manen and van Manen (2021), Jedličková et al. (2022), and Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). They suggest that researchers approach the phenomena within their respective domains and with an interpretive framework that evolves in response to new understandings of those domains. In this study, toxic leadership is characterized as leadership in which leaders' behaviors inflict physical or psychological harm on their subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018).

The theory guiding this study is Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triangle, also known as the dark triad. The toxic triangle theory explains the fundamentals of toxic leadership as it relates to narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. It emphasizes how these three characteristics in a leader can affect followers. Addressing this gap in the literature is essential because the adverse outcomes associated with toxic leadership may be different for Army service members than civilians due to the inability of Army service members to resign (Van, 2019). Exploring the experiences of toxic leadership among Army service members may help support service personnel to tailor interventions for those suffering from the consequences of toxic leadership.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore toxic leadership experiences and their negative impacts as described by recently retired U.S. Army service members. Previous studies have not fully explored this group's experiences of toxic leadership (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). While some existing research has identified ways to recognize and mitigate such destructive leadership (Fosse et al., 2019), the findings from this study contributed to understanding how widespread toxic leadership is within the military context.

The study is anchored on Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triad, also called the dark triad, representing an understanding of toxic leadership practices. This study extends prior research conducted by Walker and Watkins (2020) and Fosse et al. (2019), who relayed that more research was necessary to expand the understanding of the experiential effects of toxic leadership in the military context. Various scholars have examined toxic leadership, primarily focusing on its impact on employee well-being, performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Baloyi, 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Wolor et al., 2022). Each of these studies recognized how the foundational elements of toxic leadership impact an organizational culture while comparing toxic and empowering leadership with work motivation dimensions.

Existing research on toxic leadership has primarily explored its effects on aspects of the leader's role, including its influence on team dynamics, decision-making processes, and organizational culture (Fahie, 2020; Fors Brandebo, 2020; Reyhanoglu & Akin, 2022). Moreover, these studies examined toxic leadership in higher education, crisis management, and health care services. The researchers investigated the impact of toxic leaders as they deteriorated

into destructive leadership and how such behavior impedes successful and productive workflow. Molino et al. (2019) found that the harmful behavior of a toxic leader causes various adverse outcomes for staff. However, most of this research failed to investigate toxic leadership outcomes in military service persons. Therefore, there is a need to examine the adverse effects of toxic leadership in military services and expand the current literature regarding military members' experiences with toxic leaders.

This review of the literature is designed to support this study and is organized by thematic categories developed from the previous research associated with the problem and purpose of the study (Molino et al., 2019; Reyhanoglu & Akin, 2022; Semedo et al., 2022). The first section addresses the conceptual framework and its utilization in this study. Subsequent to this, existing literature is explored, starting with a summary of foundational research on leadership models. A detailed analysis of various leadership styles follows. This section also discusses transactional, authentic, and transformational leadership practices and their tendencies toward toxic leadership behaviors. The following section discusses the impact of toxic leadership qualities and leader behaviors, the subjectiveness in defining toxic leadership, the reasons for these leadership behaviors, and their adverse outcomes. The final two sections cover the literature on military leaders' propensity for toxic leadership and the current Army doctrine on preventing and protecting against toxic leaders. The chapter ends with a discussion of the gap found within the reviewed existing literature.

Past studies have not investigated the broader concepts associated with toxic leadership in the U.S. armed forces. Previous research investigating military practice is limited and confined to preventing leadership toxicity rather than the experiences of the officers, serving or retired. Limitations of past studies include qualitative studies not exploring the perceptions of military

persons affected by toxic leadership. Conversely, quantitative studies have not examined how such toxic leadership impacts Army soldiers during their service or after their return to civilian life. Existing literature has not thoroughly explored what constitutes toxicity in leadership or the circumstances under which individuals report their interactions with toxic leaders (Williams, 2018). Understanding the relational and experiential effects of toxic leadership can be beneficial in determining measures and methods to prevent future military members from behaving similarly.

This study focused on the specific population of U.S. Army personnel. Focusing on this population, along with those in leadership positions, is vital because there is a tendency for researchers and policymakers to exclude prevention and protection measures within the military context (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Brandebo et al., 2019; Horval, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Molino et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). As such, the findings of this study may contribute to the prevention of harm in the military community by underlining the significance of facilitating direct proactive methods to dissuade toxic behavior.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Guided by Paulhus and Williams's (2002) conceptual framework, this study examines the toxic triangle, also referred to as the dark triad. This triangle establishes three destructive or toxic leadership domains: narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic characteristics. Each domain overlaps with the others and comprises a separate set of personality characteristics; however, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy all involve the lack of ethical traits such as humility, fairness, faithfulness, and honesty. Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that individuals in the three domains were insensitive to others' feelings yet could retain the capacity to assess the

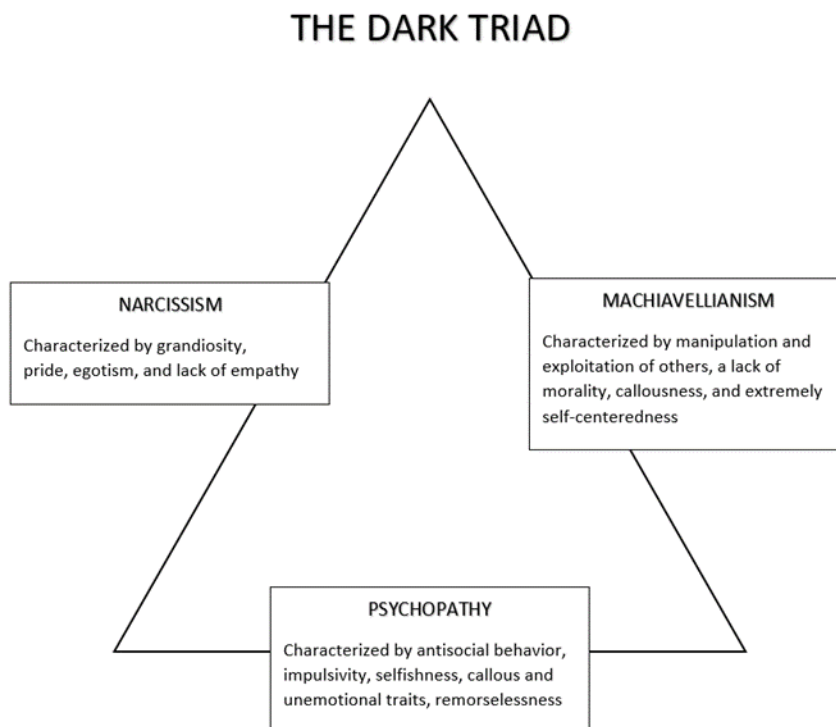
latter's emotions. Such ability permits the narcissist, the Machiavellian, and the psychopath to manipulate situations to suit their needs purposefully.

### Toxic Triangle: The Dark Triad

Paulhus and Williams (2002) developed the dark triad to explain the formation of toxic leadership and how three characteristics interact with an individual: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, as shown in Figure 1. The triangle has three corners: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments (Padilla et al., 2007).

**Figure 1**

*Toxic Triangle*



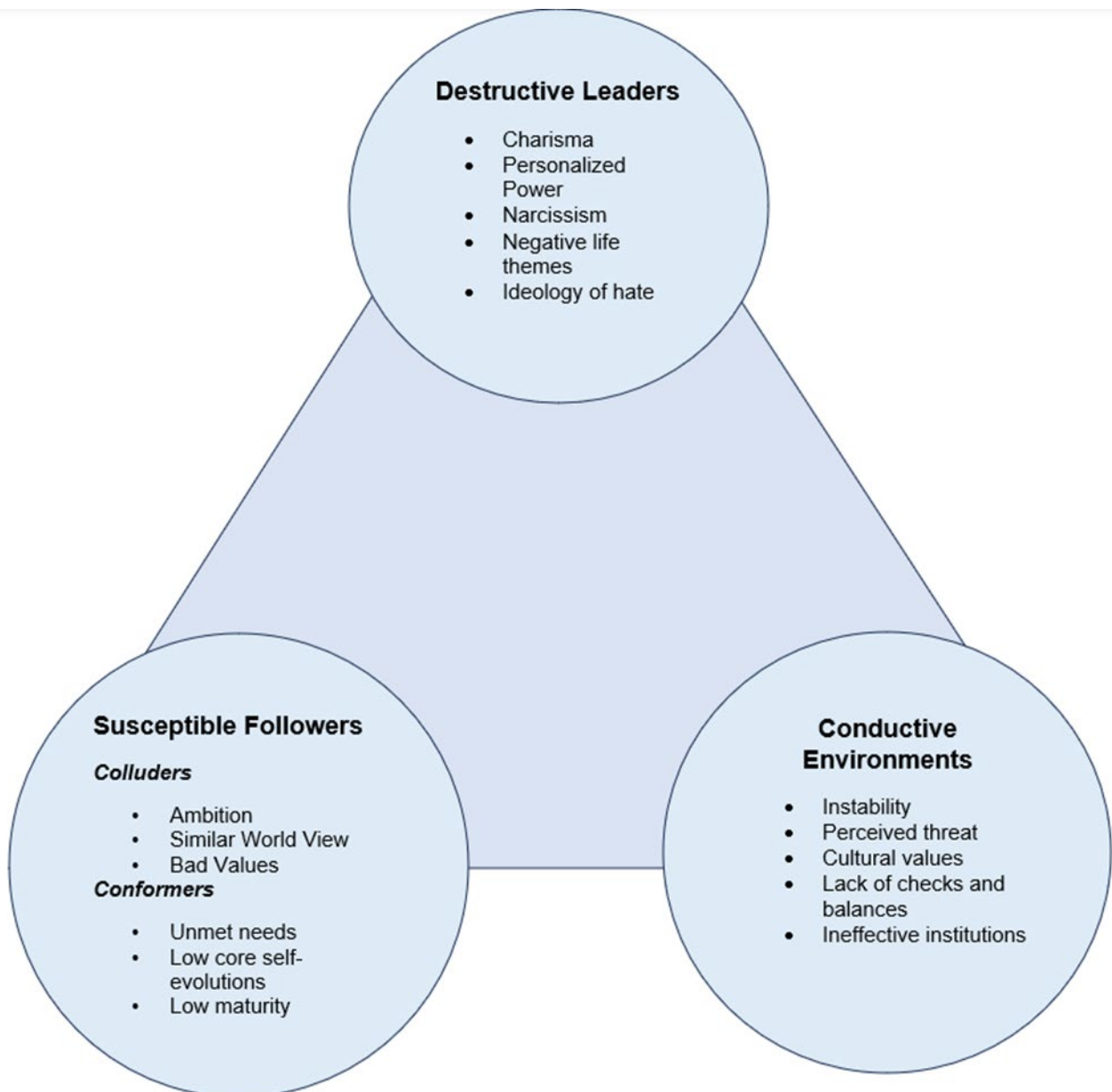
*Note.* From "The dark triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy," by D. L. Paulhus & K. M. Williams, 2002, *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36, p. 556–563. [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00505-6](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00505-6).



Figure 2 exhibits the three domains of the dark triad with their associated facets, which make up each notion of toxicity.

**Figure 2**

*Three Corners of the Dark Triad*



*Note.* From "The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments," by A. Padilla, R. Hogan, & R. B. Kaiser, 2007, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(3), 176–194. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.001>

The sides of the triangle are conjoined at the apex of destructive leadership, which includes traits of charisma, personalized power, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Additionally, environments conducive to toxic leadership involve climates that increase instability, perceived threats, lack of cultural values, a lack of checks and balances, and ineffectiveness within the institution. The third corner of the triangle presents the followers as susceptible to toxic leaders, with conformers created through unmet needs, low core self-evaluations, and low maturity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In addition to the conformers, the colluders spark ambition, similar worldviews, and views associated with a harmful environment.

Paulhus and Williams (2002) recognized that the narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic personality traits within the toxic triangle are nonpathological yet deemed just as destructive as pathological traits. As the three domains are closely related, the researchers emphasized that as independent personality traits, all three involve malevolent connotations. In their study, Paulhus and Williams (2002) correlated the Big Five personality traits with the three domains. Paulhus and Williams (2002) established a notable framework in their research, which found that subclinical psychopaths were characterized by low neuroticism. Additionally, both Machiavellians and psychopaths exhibited low levels of conscientiousness, while narcissism was associated with a slight increase in cognitive ability. Furthermore, they noted that 'narcissists and, to a lesser extent, psychopaths exhibited self-enhancement on two objectively scored indexes' (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 558).

To measure the extent of these characteristics within the domain of the dark triad held by an individual, Paulhus and Jones (2014) developed the Dark Triad Personality Test. This test measures an individual's narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic traits through self-

assessment. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory tests for narcissism, while the Machiavellianism IV (MACH-IV) tests for Machiavellianism. To test for psychopathic tendencies, the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale is used (Paulhus & Jones, 2014).

The toxic triangle has empirical and theoretical components (Z. Chen & Sun, 2021). These components (a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment) focus on the pragmatic and hypothetical situations that impact organizational culture. Additionally, these components, when combined, create an undesirable work environment. Persons with toxic personalities or harmful leadership behaviors have narcissism, Machiavellian, and psychopathic characteristics (Z. Chen & Sun, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2019; Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, 2016).

### *Narcissism*

Narcissistic leaders' behaviors might include pridefulness, egotism, lack of empathy, and grandiosity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tiwari & Jha, 2022). Narcissists have an entitlement attitude and believe that society owes them because of their perceived or actual superiority. Being incredibly self-involved, an individual with this personality trait ignores the needs of others but expects others to attend to the narcissist's needs immediately. The narcissist fails to recognize their behavior's impact on others. This failure in a leader can result in employee disengagement (Baloyi, 2020).

### *Machiavellianism*

Machiavellian leadership characteristics are often considered significant traits in toxic leaders. However, researchers suggested that Machiavellian leaders do not outwardly show the unhealthy behaviors associated with these characteristics; thus, many fail to recognize that an individual's Machiavellianism negatively impacts employees (DeHoogh et al., 2021; Feng et al.,

2022). The MACH-IV test, a 20-question Likert scale personality survey, measures Machiavellianism. This test is the standard self-assessment tool used to determine the level of Machiavellian personality under the umbrella of the dark triad.

The Machiavellianism construct within the dark triad of personality attributes represents an individual's ability to manipulate (Christie & Geis, 1970). The most influential characteristics of a Machiavellian in terms of toxic leadership behaviors include being deceptive, sneaky, distrusting, and distrustful. The toxic leader has such Machiavellian traits as cynicism with misanthropic beliefs. They appear sincere in their actions, but underneath, they are callous and constantly strive for status, power, and notice of others (Triantoro et al., 2020).

### ***Hubris or Psychopathy***

A toxic leader has psychopathic tendencies such as impulsivity, thrill-seeking behaviors, and low empathy toward their employees (Dagless, 2018; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). While psychopathy is considered a mental disorder with antisocial constructs, psychopaths cannot generally have social relationships and love due to their egocentric behaviors. Some experts in psychology and criminology define psychopathy by specific personality traits. These characteristics can include superficial charm, high regard for self, and deceitfulness; these characteristics often lead others to believe that the individual has shallow emotions (Furnham et al., 2013; Maung, 2021). Additionally, psychopaths need constant stimulation and often express their boredom with daily routines. They have a history of hostile conduct and are manipulative and deceptive; however, psychopaths are also characterized by superficial charm, high intelligence, and a sense of pathological egocentricity (Maung, 2021).

### **Application of the Dark Triads to this Study**

The dark triad's three domains of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are established within the conceptual framework of the present study, enabling new ideas for preventative measures against toxic leadership behaviors. Researchers should consider mitigating any toxic actions by leaders before they occur. As such, the conceptual framework established aids in preventing a reported offense. There remains a relatively high prevalence of toxic leadership in the U.S. military, including in the U.S. Army (Fosse et al., 2019). However, with the extant research lacking discussion on the prevalence of toxic leadership within the military, the current study applies the conceptual dark triad model to interpret the collected data and establish a generalized process for mitigating harmful leadership behavior.

### **Related Literature**

A search was conducted through multiple databases using keywords and phrases like toxic leadership, counterproductive leadership, interpretive phenomenological, and U.S. Army service members for existing literature specific to the topic of interest. This review included studies and resources that addressed common issues identified in multiple searches, particularly on works published within the last five years. The studies selected for this literature review discussed the subjectivity of the definition of toxic leadership, the characteristics of a toxic leader, reasons for their behaviors, and unfavorable outcomes. Additionally, related literature examined the military's propensity for toxic leadership and the prevention of and protection from dysfunctional leaders.

### **Early Research on Leadership Models**

In the mid-20th century, researchers studying organizations identified leadership styles (Organ, 1996). The concept of leadership practices gained prominence in the 1940s, evolving

significantly in leadership discussions over the decades. Bond (2021) asserts that researchers have characterized leadership as the conduct of a person who guides and influences both individual and group activities (Bond, 2021). Some researchers widely examined contemporary leadership theories, focusing on developing different leadership practices (Dess & Picken, 2000; Kumar et al., 2014). Early studies on leadership suggested that certain innate personality traits characterized successful leaders and distinguished them from unsuccessful ones. Following widespread criticism of the trait approach, the style, and behavioral approaches emerged, which describe a leader's best style and behavior in leading an organization (Z. A. Khan et al., 2016). The leadership field is still fermented with controversies about conceptual and methodological issues. There is criticism against different leadership styles and behavioral approaches, with some researchers alleging that these approaches seem to ignore distinct factors that require a leader's intervention (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Studies found that, unlike individuals with productive leadership traits, leaders with poor leadership styles exhibited dominance (Nichols, 2016; Pidgeon, 2017). The style of leadership examined in these studies emphasized a strong command and consolidation of authority. According to Northouse (2018), leadership during this period was characterized by the leader's capacity to impose their will on followers, thereby fostering obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation (Northouse, 2018, p. 2). Studies found that, unlike individuals with productive leadership traits, leaders with poor leadership styles showed dominance (Nichols, 2016; Pidgeon, 2017). However, the attitude toward dominance changed during the mid-20th century, with leadership scholars promoting influence and motivational tactics instead of domination. Leadership is now considered a fundamental part of an individual or organization's characteristics (Q. Chen et al., 2019).

Over time, scholars have made a clear distinction between leadership, which is primarily based on influence, and what Bond (2021) refers to as “drivership,” or a form of leadership that relies on coercion, as discussed by I. Khan & Nawaz (2016). In the 1950s and 1960s, experts evolved the concept of leadership, emphasizing it as a dynamic interaction focused on mutual objectives. During this period, it was understood that leaders exhibit behaviors that effectively guide workforce employees toward these collective purposes (Burns, 2017; Northouse, 2018). Burns (2017) further described leadership as acts by persons who influence other persons in a shared direction. The 1970s saw a shift in focus to an organizational behaviors approach, characterized by leadership that initiates and maintains groups or organizations to accomplish group or organizational goals, a perspective consistent with Khan and Nawaz's (2016) description of leadership (p. 145). Their conceptualization aligns with the emphasis on situational leadership styles that emerged during this period.

Schein (2011) observed that leadership and organizational culture are closely linked, with leaders shaping the culture of their organizations and being shaped by it in return. This understanding aligns with the broader conceptualization of leadership, emphasizing its impact on organizational dynamics. Thus, to improve organizational performance under this philosophy, leaders must be flexible and adjust their leadership style to the existing culture (Bass & Bass, 2008). By shifting focus from situational leadership styles, the implicit leadership theory offers another perspective on leadership (Lord et al., 2020). This theory proposes that individuals gradually develop, often unconsciously and from a very early stage of life, a set of beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of leaders. These beliefs shape their expectations and perceptions of leadership in various contexts.

Implicit leadership refers to followers attributing leadership qualities to someone based on how their behaviors and characteristics align with the followers' implicit beliefs (Lord et al., 2020). However, other studies related to leadership further recognized that people in a particular setting, such as an organization or society, all share similar implicit leadership traits (Mahajan & Sharma, 2015; Palanski et al., 2014; Reichard et al., 2021; Tavares et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). The notion was that when people interacted in a group, they shared a lot about their history, norms, habits, approaches, core values, perspectives, and beliefs about leadership. Palanski et al. (2014) found that employees' perceptions were more positive when leaders and the workforce shared cultural beliefs and practices. Perceptions of toxicity in a leader's behavior were more pronounced among personnel with different cultural backgrounds, and considering the uniqueness and diversity of military culture, this difficulty may be exacerbated within military organizations (Williams, 2018).

Much of the early literature discussing leadership traits focused on cultural values that affected leadership styles. For instance, Euwema et al. (2007) demonstrated that when there is a difference in cultural values between subordinates and leaders, organizational targets and results can still be successfully achieved by considering specific elements such as effective communication, mutual respect, and adaptation to cultural diversity. However, the investigation involved the interaction of two single cultures, one of the leaders and the other of the people (or followers).

Leadership influence on diverse workforces and how the style of leadership is perceived can be understood using two main approaches, emic and etic (Beals et al., 2020; Euwema et al., 2007; Galperin et al., 2022; Pradipta, 2020). An emic approach focuses on ideas, behaviors, and concepts uniquely driven by a specific culture, like the military (Berry, 2023; Engler &



Whitesides, 2022; Mostowlansky et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). The emic approach suggests that leaders from different cultural backgrounds display different leadership features and behavioral patterns (Beals et al., 2020; Galperin et al., 2022). In contrast, an etic approach focuses on ideas, behaviors, and images that transcend particular cultures and become culturally universal (Gibb, 2023; Kawamoto et al., 2016; Vora & Kainzbauer, 2020). Looking at culture through an etic lens, an observer recognizes how this approach facilitates an open view of the culture from a neutral perspective without ethnocentric, political, or cultural bias (Pradipta, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). This approach assumes that certain behaviors are universally accepted regardless of the specific culture. The overall goal of an etic approach to leadership is to understand the cultural meaning and significance of leadership behaviors and practices from the perspectives of those who engage in such behavior (Lituchy et al., 2017; Mikva et al., 2019; Sorensen et al., 2022).

### **Leadership Styles**

Characteristics of individuals in leadership roles are as different as their personalities. However, when researchers examined common factors in leaders to determine qualities that influence successful leaders, they found that certain personality traits among leaders impacted their success or failure (Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020; Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019). Olanrewaju and Okorie (2019) used a quantitative research approach to examine the responses to a questionnaire about leadership qualities. The authors analyzed responses from a sample ( $N = 127$ ) of managers in organizations in industries like banking, information technology, food, and construction. The findings showed that the most noteworthy qualities of a good leader were understanding, accessibility, dedication, neutrality, modesty, aspiration, and attentiveness (Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019). Later examinations of these findings through Cakir and Adiguzel's (2020) study

indicated that the former researchers recognized leadership characteristics as being effective and efficient.

According to the organizational culture literature, the leader's role is to create and maintain a cultural direction (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Bowers, 2019; Engler & Whitesides, 2022; Gemedá & Lee, 2020; Men & Stacks, 2013; Mostowlansky et al., 2020). Similarly, research on leadership suggests that the ability to understand and work within a culture is essential to leadership effectiveness (Gemedá & Lee, 2020). Furthermore, Anderson and Sun (2017) and Gemedá and Lee (2020) studied leaders from different nationalities to indicate the diversity in cultural preferences. Other nationalities can be categorized into distinct groups based on various dimensions within a cultural framework. While Anderson and Sun (2017) suggested that these roles were necessary for successful leadership, Gemedá and Lee (2020) found that influencing others is critical to leadership roles.

Gemedá and Lee's (2020) sample believed good leadership involved aptitude, dignity, amiability, insight and confidence, honesty, responsibility, decency, self-assurance, charity, and reliability. Olanrewaju and Okorie (2019) concluded that leaders should demonstrate these qualities to optimize their and the organization's effectiveness and efficiency. Likewise, Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) found that successful leaders embody ethical behaviors and beliefs such as honesty, decency, charitableness, and empathy. Moreover, Cakir and Adiguzel's (2020) and Olanrewaju and Okorie's (2019) research found that such leadership traits positively impacted knowledge-sharing behaviors, which increased job performance and satisfaction.

Leadership traits also influence an individual's leadership style. An individual's qualities or personal characteristics assist in forming a leadership behavior, which creates their leadership style (Price-Dowd, 2020). Since not all individuals have positive attributes, not all leaders

behave positively. Not all leaders have the dynamism needed to enable continuous learning and change; thus, the negative aspects of their leadership style can create negativity (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Burke and Barron (2015) found that negative leadership traits like those of toxic leaders impact their leadership styles. Dobbs and Do (2019) and Crews et al. (2019) recognized that positive personality traits play a crucial role in shaping an individual's leadership style. For instance, an individual with a transactional leadership style may exhibit characteristics such as focus, proactivity, and integration, which contribute to their approach to leadership.

This research examines common leadership styles, such as transformational and transactional, to investigate the inherent tension that exists between leaders using different leadership styles. Standard examinations suggest that these two leadership styles are most common among leaders (Carleton et al., 2018). However, the two styles have unique qualities, with transformational leaders less likely than transactional leaders to have toxic leadership qualities (Daniels et al., 2019; Hesbol, 2019). Transformational leaders can change an organization so that the entire organization grows into something more significant (Carleton et al., 2018; Hesbol, 2019). Such leadership relies upon existing leaders cultivating new leaders from all levels of followership (Carleton et al., 2018). However, Carleton et al. (2018) argued that transformational leadership was not a cure-all, while Daniels et al. (2019) supported its positive impact in various industries and disciplines.

### ***Transactional Leadership***

Transactional leadership emerges from formal relations between leaders and subordinates and performance expectations (Avolio, 2018; Duemer, 2017). Baloyi (2020) and Sirin et al. (2018) examined transactional leadership with toxic relationship traits. They found that this leadership style promoted adverse employee outcomes such as increased turnover intention, poor

job satisfaction, and decreased retention. In other studies, Barnett (2018) and Gemedda and Lee (2020) claimed transactional leadership significantly predicted lower overall job satisfaction. Furthermore, Gemedda and Lee (2020) identified that a transactional leadership style enhances the probability that followers will complete tasks or jobs following the leader's methodology. However, experts deemed such a method effective in ensuring follower compliance and task completion, not job satisfaction. According to Nicodemus (2022), compliance appears to fill the need of followers who have found a job that fits their mental capabilities and health. Though they experience some degree of stress, they still love their job and have high satisfaction levels (Nicodemus, 2022). Transactional leaders acknowledge that they are the boss, and as the boss, they have the right to promote certain work facets as they see fit (Coldwell, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021).

Research has indicated that transactional leadership is characterized by its managerial qualities, with transactional leaders often maintaining strict and consistent rules within their domains and workforce (Gemedda & Lee, 2020; Steinmann et al., 2018). Young et al. (2021) and Ma and Jiang (2018) claimed that transactional leaders focus on organization, supervision, and group performance and pay attention to employees' work to correct errors. Researchers examining transactional leaders determined that these leaders were most likely concerned with maintaining the typical workday operational flow of their department and, therefore, less likely than transformational leaders to show flexibility and empathy with their employees (Hussain et al., 2017; Padmakumar & Dwivedi, 2021). However, strict oversight leads to a toxic environment if leaders promote a lack of employee recognition or unhealthy communication or favor one employee over another (Anjum et al., 2018; Rasool et al., 2021).

Transactional leaders are resolute in using disciplinary measures to address underperformance and rewarding employees for their achievements. As highlighted by Lan et al. (2019) and Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad (2019), this perspective underscores the transactional leader's approach of using rewards and punishments as motivational tools. This practice remains typical in encouraging innovative employee behaviors, as money is a great incentive. For example, a transactional leader may use a bonus system. However, the transactional leader only focuses on incremental and short-term success and does not provide education when such a project fails (Hansen & Pihl-Thingvad, 2019). Consequently, researchers noted that a transactional leader focuses more on punishment for such failures than on the changes needed to correct the problem for the future (Gemedá & Lee, 2020; Hansen & Pihl-Thingvad, 2019).

Leaders immersed in transactional leadership practices rely on a rewards and punishment system to achieve employee motivation (Crews et al., 2019; Lan et al., 2019; Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2021; Ponomariov et al., 2020). Bond (2021) discusses that in a transactional leadership framework, leaders often employ rewards or punishments as mechanisms to encourage followers to complete tasks or achieve performance targets. Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2021) note that transactional leadership predominantly involves allocating resources efficiently, monitoring employee performance closely, and guiding followers toward specific organizational tasks or goals. Leaders adopt these methods to fulfill performance objectives and successfully execute required missions. Ponomariov et al. (2020) add that by enabling subordinates to achieve these goals, transactional leaders can reduce workplace stress and enhance focus on critical organizational outcomes such as improved quality, superior customer service, cost efficiency, and increased productivity.

Jacobsen et al. (2021) and Sirin et al. (2018) found that transactional leaders are influential in several ways. For example, employees under transactional leadership often understand the rules, the rewards, and the punishment system (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Sirin et al., 2018). However, transactional leaders recognize that regardless of the motivational factors, they should be singularly focused and only serve their employees and their self-interest (Crews et al., 2019). Employees who understood the rewards for their achievements or accomplishments were likelier to pursue them (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Sirin et al., 2018). Nonetheless, transactional leadership promotes management by exception, which emphasizes corrective actions to accomplish the needed performance improvements and the resulting maintenance of the status quo for the company (Jacobsen et al., 2021).

The demands of today's organizational environments underscore the importance of transactional leadership, particularly its contribution to enhancing efficiency, as highlighted by Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2021) and Ponomariov et al. (2020). Bond (2021) emphasizes that the central aspect of transactional leadership involves linking performance outcomes with strategic planning, enabling leaders to clearly define their expectations for employees. It focuses on a leader recognizing and applying supervision structures while promoting compliance of followers using a reward and punishment system (Hussain et al., 2017). Hussain et al. (2017) considered transactional leadership a practical and direct leadership style that provides a straightforward way for employees and leaders to relate and adhere to stated parameters. However, research from Crews et al. (2019) and Lan et al. (2019) showed that transactional leadership measures failed to improve levels of intellectual stimulation and risked enabling a lackluster commitment from team members.

Ma & Jiang (2018) and Padmakumar & Dwivedi (2021) discuss how transactional leaders employ a system of rewards and punishments to encourage compliance among followers. According to Padmakumar and Dwivedi (2021), shared elevation transforms followers into leaders and ethical and principled agents, thereby altering employees' and followers' values and perceptions. Crews et al. (2019) contend that applying this leadership style aims to facilitate establishing well-defined goals. Crews et al. (2019) argued that using this leadership style was intended to influence the creation of clear objectives. However, per Malik et al. (2018) and Young et al. (2021), research indicates that a significant limitation of this leadership approach is its challenge in facilitating change. Studies (2018) show that adapting to change typically involves collaborative teamwork rather than relying solely on the directive of a specific leader, a feature commonly associated with the transactional model.

Advocates of transactional leadership practices suggest that leading people using force would fall to the wayside and replace innovative, productive partnerships between leaders and employees (Crews et al., 2019; Padmakumar & Dwivedi, 2021). Consequently, organizational leaders prefer the gentler aspects of leadership, including people skills, empathy, and character. People skills determine the ability of individual leaders to enhance employee motivation. An empathetic leader understands their employees and eventually builds trust (Padmakumar & Dwivedi, 2021). Leaders offer a sense of stability by exhibiting sound judgment and integrity while demonstrating the ability to make logical and wise decisions on the organization's behalf, as such choices would support rather than undermine their employees (Crews et al., 2019). Character impacts the ability of leaders to work with employees and motivates them to do their best. Per Bond (2021), transactional leaders used tactics to shape followers' behavior, noting that these leaders typically forge contractual relationships that prioritize extrinsic compensations, risk

aversion, and the pursuit of greater organizational efficiency, based on insights from (Hamstra et al., 2013).

### ***Transformational Leadership***

The character traits of transformational leaders stimulate and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their leadership capabilities (Hamstra et al., 2013).

Transformational leadership enables employees to build relationships with their leaders that yield positive results. Transformational leadership encourages leaders to address the needs of their followers, motivate them, and align their actions with the aspirations of both individuals and the organization as a whole. Avolio (2018) posits that such leadership significantly boosts workers' performance and organizational expansion, mainly under passive management approaches.

Nevertheless, intervention becomes necessary when performance standards are unmet.

According to Avolio (2018) and Peng et al. (2020), transformational leadership also profoundly influences the psychological commitment of employees to their organization.

### ***Authoritarian Leadership***

Toxic behavior is also typical among authoritarian leaders, who display tendencies such as making all workplace decisions while allowing little or no input from other employees (Wang et al., 2019). The authoritarian leader dictates work methods and processes while discouraging creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. These leaders create highly structured and rigid environments while establishing outlined and communicated rules. Studies on authoritarian leaders found that employees who work under such individuals experience a lack of trust in the leader's decision-making and task completion (Karabati et al., 2019; Pizzolitto et al., 2022). This structure often leads to toxic leadership behaviors if an individual abuses their leadership role (Du et al., 2020; Kiahn Acuna & Male, 2022; Zaman et al., 2022). Authoritarian leaders have a



propensity for toxicity as they are often bossy, controlling, and self-centered, showing little concern for their employees and taking all the credit for profits and productivity (Asim et al., 2021; Du et al., 2020; Pizzolitto et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019).

Iqbal et al. (2021) and Karabati et al. (2019) contended that there is an occasional benefit to the autocratic leadership style. However, more researchers stated there are several ways in which this leadership style is problematic (Du et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2021; Zhang & Xie, 2017). Individuals who abuse an autocratic leadership style are known to create a toxic work environment as their personalities are seen as bossy, controlling, and dictatorial, which causes employee resentment (Iqbal et al., 2021; Zhang & Xie, 2017). Moreover, Iqbal et al. (2021) and Zhang and Xie (2017) found that individuals working under an authoritarian leader experienced low job satisfaction and higher turnover rates. Du et al. (2020) examined employees' experiences with autocratic leaders. They found that an entire department's workforce felt that it was problematic to give their input on procedures and processes in the daily workload (Du et al., 2020). Furthermore, Du et al. (2020) claimed that skilled and capable workforce members felt undermined, but they also felt their knowledge and contributions were not appreciated.

Odumeru and Ogbonna (2013) recognized that authoritarian and toxic leadership, when combined, create leadership qualities that might not be effective. Asim et al. (2021) and Q. Chen et al. (2019) showed that authoritarian leadership and abusive supervision thwarted employee proactivity by increasing the employee's perceived powerlessness, leading to a toxic environment. Asim et al. (2021) and Karabati et al. (2019) also revealed that most authoritarian leaders engage in rumination, causing distress to their workforce as they continually infuse negativity into the working environment. Conversely, as identified by Niu et al. (2018) and Wong et al. (2020), positive exchanges in authentic leadership enhance the link between its

practices and employees' relational identification with their organization. Wong et al. (2020) and Carleton et al. (2018) suggest that authentic leaders play a pivotal role in enhancing followers' self-assessed job performance. This leadership style is notably effective in boosting the job performance of followers. Earlier research identified that professional perceptions of various leadership styles (authentic, transactional, transformational), attitudes, and behaviors are considered critical issues across numerous industries (Carleton et al., 2018; Gameda & Lee, 2020). These ruminating practices create poor concentration, motivation, and cognition levels. Moreover, individuals under authoritarian leaders often experience decreased problem-solving abilities, heightened levels of stress, and increased difficulties in social relationships (Asim et al., 2021; Karabati et al., 2019). However, other researchers considered it beneficial to have strict leaders, including managers, who can make quick decisions during stressful situations (Harkin, 2018).

### ***Authentic Leadership***

Authentic leadership derives from Greek philosophy and emphasizes advancing core or cardinal virtues (Smith et al., 2019). Many scholars believe several benefits, positive trends, and outcomes can derive from authentic leadership practices (Niu et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2020). For instance, Smith et al. (2019) and Wong et al. (2020) argued that authentic leadership, with its theoretical origins in positive psychology, fostered positive growth and self-fulfillment perceptions. Niu et al. (2018) noted that authentic leadership fosters attributes like unbiased processing, relational orientation, awareness, and proactive behavior. Crawford et al. (2020) explain the four essential dimensions of authentic leadership:

- Self-awareness, which involves acknowledging one's own strengths and weaknesses.

- Relational transparency, emphasizing the importance of straightforward and truthful communication.
- An internalized moral perspective, which directs actions based on strong ethical beliefs and values.
- Balanced processing, which entails evaluating a variety of perspectives before decision-making.

Niu et al. (2018) identified authentic leadership as an essential method for enhancing health and well-being within organizations. This view is supported by other scholars who recognize authentic leadership as a beneficial and influential approach (Lyubovnikova et al., 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2018). Lyubovnikova et al. (2017) posited that authentic leadership is characterized by a pattern of behavior that leverages and encourages positive psychological capacities and ethical environments. It impacts team performance by cultivating enhanced self-awareness, a deeply ingrained moral outlook, thorough consideration of information, and open communication between leaders and followers, thereby promoting positive self-development" (Lyubovnikova et al., 2017, p. 60). Smith et al. (2019) also presented a perspective that positions authentic leadership as fundamental to effective leadership, especially in establishing trust. Leaders who demonstrate transparency, integrity, and high moral standards are more likely to gain trust, as these traits are integral to authenticity, which involves the free expression of one's true or core self in daily activities. Such leaders' consistent demonstration of transparency, integrity, and high moral standards fosters trust. Therefore, behaviors associated with authentic leadership are linked to followers' trust in their leaders (Smith et al., 2019).

Authentic leadership embodies the fundamental essence of leading efficiently and effectively, which is crucial for fostering healthy work environments and achieving positive

employee outcomes. They can discern how professional attitudes and behaviors impact an organization (Smith et al., 2019; Van Nieuwenhuyzen, 2016). Research suggests that authentic leadership is emerging as a significant model within positive organizational psychology. Leaders under this model promote employee health and safety, cultivating healthy workplace environments that influence staff performance and overall organizational results (Alilyyani et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2018). Rather than authoritarian leadership, leaders characterized by self-recognition, truthfulness, openness, consistent ethical conduct, and steadfastness are essential for fostering trust and effectiveness within organizations. (Y. D. Lee & Kuo, 2019).

Researchers have identified transformational leaders as those who prioritize the organizational good over personal interests. These leaders are known for their shared traits and behaviors, including embracing a grand vision for the organization, exceeding expectations through enhanced performance, and employing learned behaviors to achieve goals (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Furthermore, Bond (2021) notes transformational leaders play a crucial role in fostering an organizational culture that motivates employees and encourages creativity. This approach not only promotes employee growth and commitment but also leads to increased productivity and extra effort (Wren, 2018).

Cho et al. (2019) and Lee, A., and Ding (2020) noted that transformational leadership traits incite inspiration within the workforce, thus enhancing job satisfaction and productivity. Comparatively, transactional leadership increases external motivational influences through a singular focus on the performance of job tasks (Mufti et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020). The transformational leadership style is strongly linked to increased trust in leaders and exceptional employee performance levels (Mufti et al., 2020). This leadership approach enhances followers' constructive attitudes, behaviors, and performance outcomes. However, the fundamental element

of effective leadership is often seen as authentic leadership, according to Van Nieuwenhuyzen (2016), which is crucial for fostering trust and creating healthier workplace environments that promote patience and care. Additionally, Sirin et al. (2018) suggest that employees' perspectives of their organizations significantly enhance individual, group, and organizational performance.

Transformational leaders inspire consistent and collaborative change within a given organization by exercising inspirational motivation, where the leader inspires the employees and motivates them to do their best (Wirawan et al., 2019). As a theoretical concept, transformational leadership has foundations in self-efficacy, motivational personality traits, and emotional intelligence (Daniels et al., 2019). The goals of a given organization are more attainable when followers and leaders participate collaboratively and collectively (Carleton et al., 2018; Hesbol, 2019). This collaboration is fundamental as it enhances workforce performance overall (Wirawan et al., 2019).

Avolio (2018) reviewed literature suggesting that transformational leadership, derived from transactional leadership, helps clarify leaders' and followers' goals and motivations. Transactional leadership laid the groundwork for other leadership theories using more culturally acceptable leadership practices (Y. D. Lee & Kuo, 2019). Transformational leaders consider the needs of each employee, leading to mutual recognition and fostering the belief that everyone has leadership qualities.

Transformational leaders act as role models for the employees they oversee and work to guide them through visions of and for the future (Barnett, 2018). They develop and encourage change through their and employees' ideas and inspirations (Avolio, 2018). Barnett (2018) found that transformational leadership significantly predicted increased job satisfaction. This leadership style triggers individual abilities to motivate the workforce and creates collective morale,

enhancing job performance (Avolio, 2018). Additionally, the transformational leadership style encourages employees to take ownership of their contributions to the company, as it inspires and motivates them to improve production through positive accomplishments (Carleton et al., 2018; Y. D. Lee & Kuo, 2019; Malik et al., 2018; Sirin et al., 2018). Transformational leaders are change agents ready to produce positive outcomes based on their trust in their workers by accepting innovation and encouraging their team with such changes (Jiatong et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Steinmann et al., 2018).

As Hesbol (2019) opined, transformational leadership is an efficacious approach that often results in positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, a positive work environment, and retention of employees. Effectiveness indicators, including the quality and quantity of productivity, can be used to measure job performance. When led by a transformational leader, employees are more likely to produce positive work outcomes than other leadership styles (Avolio, 2018; Lin et al., 2020). Lin et al. (2020) found transformational leadership often related to employees' commitment to excellent work outcomes, their positive well-being, and clear distinguishment of their roles.

Transformational leaders are likely to listen to their team members while incorporating combined ideas and suggestions into the organization's decision-making process and strategic vision and planning (A. Lee et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2020). Researchers found that employees were committed to an organization with this type of engagement (Lin et al., 2020; Mufti et al., 2020). Further, scholars have recognized that transformational leaders have their employees' loyalty because they make decisions with and for the workforce (Y. D. Lee & Kuo, 2019; Peng et al., 2020). Moreover, leaders adhering to the transformational theory are more people-oriented than their transactional counterparts, who are more task-oriented (Y. D. Lee & Kuo, 2019; Lin et

al., 2020; Mufti et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020). Transformational leaders are usually highly charismatic and continually inspire high employee motivation. Relative to toxic leadership, the transformational leadership style is concerned with establishing an environment that favors the workforce's commitment, trust, and respect. Therefore, transformational leaders are not likely to exhibit toxic leadership characteristics (Lin et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020).

Research indicates that leaders who adopt the transformational leadership style are likelier to experience higher levels of employee trust and exceptional work performance (Mufti et al., 2020). This leadership approach is also associated with positive changes in followers' attitudes, behaviors, and performance results (De Jong et al., 2016). Transformational leadership's effectiveness manifests in its ability to enhance followers' sense of efficacy, empowerment, trust, and identity, demonstrating its broad impact (Peng et al., 2020; Schaubroeck et al., 2007).

Per Bond (2021), transformational leaders excel in clear communication, enabling employees to utilize their skills and knowledge to identify optimal strategies for achieving productive results. Daft (2015) asserts that leadership style is particularly relevant to enhancing the culture of patient safety in healthcare settings. Further, Bowers (2019), Lan et al. (2019), and Malik et al. (2018) highlight the positive impact of transformational leadership on employee well-being. These studies reveal that an unhealthy leader-employee relationship often leads to anxiety. Thus, theories supporting transformational leadership encourage leaders to develop strong connections with employees, fostering cohesive work teams and nurturing environments that support organizational goals for positive outcomes (Bond, 2021). Transformational leaders motivate their followers by consistently communicating a clear vision for what's ahead (Lan et

al., 2019; Malik et al., 2018) and recognizing and developing their followers' individual needs and potential (Alilyyani et al., 2018; Lan et al., 2019).

### **Leadership Qualities and Toxic Leadership Behaviors**

Leadership is crucial in implementing strategic plans and overcoming challenges across various industries (Day, 2019; Mohmed, 2021). Research on leadership has evolved from focusing solely on the traits of successful leaders to analyzing the strategies and behaviors associated with key leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, authentic, and autocratic (Labrague et al., 2020; Mohmed, 2021). The first three styles emphasize positive aspects of leadership, while autocratic leadership is noted for its directive and controlling methods, typically featuring a reduced focus on collaborative and empowering practices. Research indicates that transformational leaders drive innovation and alter an organization's vision and culture (Day, 2019; Labrague et al., 2020). Furthermore, Day (2019) asserts, 'Leadership significantly shapes organizational culture, making the development of appropriate leadership behaviors, strategies, and qualities crucial in any sector' (p. 59).

Business leaders frequently integrate ambitious objectives into their daily activities and within their teams. To implement these goals within their workforce, the business leader potentially becomes the employees' mentor and reinforces their determination to succeed based on the leader's actions (Coldwell, 2021; Steinmann et al., 2018). Organizational success hinges on influential leaders monitoring employees' behaviors. Organizational goals may be unattainable if these leaders do not perceive that they can influence others to achieve desired outcomes (Coldwell, 2021). Steinmann et al. (2018) suggested that employees' perceptions of different tasks affect their level of engagement. Nevertheless, an individual's sense of control depends on their forced or self-determined behavior (Gemedda & Lee, 2020).



### **Subjectiveness in Defining Toxic Leadership**

There is no one absolute definition of toxic leadership (Hinen, 2019; Milosevic et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018). According to Hinen (2019), an organization's level of discipline often determines the degree of toxicity a leader exerts. While some definitions state that the volatility and complexity of an organization's climate are the defining factors of toxic leadership, other definitions consider the potential effects of the leaders' toxicity on employees (Monico et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2021). Most definitions, however, agree that a toxic leader uses dysfunctional behaviors to manipulate, intimidate, coerce, and inflict disciplinary tactics for their benefit, ignoring those who work for them and their organizations (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Milosevic et al., 2020). Additionally, most definitions note that leaders with ingrained toxicity in their actions are often destructive in their leadership practice, creating uncondusive work climates and susceptible individuals in their workforce (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Hinen, 2019).

Hinen (2019, 2020) found that examining a toxic leader uncovers the factors of toxic leadership. Different scholars have attempted to develop a working definition of toxic leaders. For example, Hinen (2019), Milosevic et al. (2020), and Singh et al. (2018) defined toxic leadership under different disciplines, such as psychology, business, and education. Researchers claim that toxic leadership is present when a leader's behavior inflicts physical or psychological harm on subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). Additionally, toxic leadership involves harm perpetrated on an organization's stakeholders through destructive and manipulative actions (Hinen, 2019; Kiritu, 2019). Toxic leadership is regarded as a formed behavior pattern associated with negative leadership styles, potentially devastatingly affecting organizations. Among the adverse consequences are low employee morale, high turnover rates, decreased productivity, increased costs for hiring and training, and damage to an organization's

standing and reputation (Fosse et al., 2019; Ortega, 2019). Employees under the supervision of the toxic leader have no recourse, as they often have no place to report their behaviors (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Fosse et al., 2019).

The most common definition of toxic leadership was derived from corporate human resource departments and has been adopted by multiple global organizations. Researchers Dobbs & Do (2019) and Hinen (2019, 2020) identify the presence of toxic leadership in an organization through several defining factors. These factors consist of frequent negative employee feedback, arrogance, discrimination against employees based on gender, race, or other diverse factors, an emphasis on hierarchy while employees are unable to be promoted, and self-interest with an inflated ego (Baloyi et al., 2020; Milosevic et al., 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Wolor et al., 2022). While much of the research discussing toxic leadership illustrates such destructive leadership behaviors, there continues to be a lack of consensus about a viable, definitive definition for this concept (Burns, 2017; Nonis-Tramonte, 2021). Researchers have debated the essential elements of toxic leadership, particularly emphasizing how it affects job performance and the capacity of supervisors to influence their workforce (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Fosse et al., 2019).

However, experts have contended that understanding leadership traits and styles is necessary to define toxic leadership due to its impact on diverse areas (Burns, 2017; Nonis-Tramonte, 2021). For instance, Nonis-Tramonte (2021) claimed destructive leadership behavior creates a plethora of issues within a workforce that eventually causes a hostile climate, impacting productivity and profits. Labrague et al. (2020) also found that toxic leadership practices create unfavorable conditions for employees, affecting their job satisfaction, stress, absenteeism, and turnover intention. Business experts agree that the purpose of any leader, no matter their

leadership style, is to provide direction, support, and education to their workforce (Fosse et al., 2019; Nonis-Tramonte, 2021).

### **Reasons for Toxic Leadership Behaviors**

Toxic leadership behavior has been examined through the lenses of psychology, sociology, education, and other disciplines, with each perspective identifying a substantial number of factors that stimulate toxic leadership behaviors; however, no response has been deemed most effective (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Semedo et al., 2022). Toxic leaders often sustain their position due to their toxicity and destructive behaviors, which enables such individuals to make decisions with negative consequences that are blamed on others (Semedo et al., 2022). They are also integral in their leadership positions and have a conscious and unconscious understanding of how to stay in a leadership position (Almeida et al., 2021; Dagless, 2018; Fahie, 2020; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Milosevic et al., 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2018). Toxic leaders exhibit harmful and destructive traits, creating rhetoric and detrimental practices (Pelletier, 2010). For example, the toxic leader's tendencies include engaging in oppositional behavior, blaming others, holding an overly competitive attitude, acting condescendingly, and using an abuse system for disciplinary actions (Fahie, 2020). A characteristic of most toxic leaders is their narcissistic attitude, characterized by a lack of remorse, grandiose actions, pathological lies, and insensitivity. These leaders fail to accept responsibility and shun accountability. Milosevic et al. (2020) found that hostile climates, dissatisfied employees, poor internal structures, and high attrition rates in the workplace were due to toxic behaviors from an individual in a leadership position.

Almeida et al. (2021) and Hinen (2020) noted that toxic leadership continues to exist due to such leaders being in roles that perpetuate and allow such behaviors. Furthermore, studies

have often shown that toxic leaders can continue in their positions because (a) they are the head of a department, (b) the employees have no recourse, and (c) they tend to meet their goals and deliver short-term results (Anjum et al., 2018; Winn & Dykes, 2019). Coldwell (2021) examined issues of toxic leader behaviors and found that not all leaders recognized their behaviors as harmful. He suggested that leaders often impose oppressive performance expectations on employees, creating pressure that can harm them. The effects of stress and dissatisfaction include low employee retention, turnover intention, disengagement, and lack of commitment (Hogan et al., 2021; Uysal, 2019).

### **Toxic Leadership Impact on Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Performance**

Researchers have examined a toxic leader's impact on an employee in health care, business, church leadership, education, and other disciplines (Baloyi, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Rasool et al., 2021). Wolor et al. (2022) and S. Khan et al. (2016) showed that toxic leadership impacts employee motivation, engagement, and performance. Such employee behaviors related to working under toxic leaders included failing to report for work, being absent or calling in sick, and lacking motivation in their work. Moreover, the job performance of employees working for a toxic leader drops exponentially. Poor work performance has been observed during the period when the employee served under the supervision of a toxic boss (Baloyi, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021). Employees working in a toxic environment spread negative feelings among their coworkers. Research has confirmed that toxic leadership significantly impacts employee motivation and engagement (Baloyi, 2020; Rasool et al., 2021).

Employees in a positive work environment are more likely to help coworkers with heavy workloads, volunteer for other work duties, and find ways to do their work more efficiently (Jiatong et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2021). Typically, a negative attitude among employees

towards their organizations is associated with a lack of support. Under-rewarded employees feel a sense of frustration and resentment, which might lead to a lack of performance. This dissatisfaction may significantly affect the financial profitability of the organization (Jiatong et al., 2022).

Jiatong et al. (2022) and Rasool et al. (2021) asserted that business leaders will not get the outcomes they want if they fail to communicate effectively with their employees, develop trusting relationships, establish career paths for growth and development, and recognize individuals for a job well done. These motivators are rooted in expectancy theory, which posits that an individual's motivation to engage is influenced by their perception of the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes (Jiatong et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2021). This theory emphasizes the role of expectancy (the belief that effort will lead to desired performance) and instrumentality (the belief that performance will lead to desired outcomes) in shaping motivation. To obtain desired outcomes, business leaders should develop a strategy supporting the organization's mission to increase employee engagement and performance (Rasool et al., 2021).

Valence refers to a person's emotional disposition when pursuing particular objectives and outcomes (Almeida et al., 2021; A. Lee et al., 2018). Employees value the outcomes of their productivity differently; however, in a toxic environment, the employees lose their pride in their jobs, and slowly, their product work dissipates (Almeida et al., 2021; Rasool et al., 2021). The role of business leaders in the workplace and organization is essential. Experts claim business leaders should find outcomes with valence to improve employee motivation (Almeida et al., 2021; Lui & Quezada, 2019). For example, an inspired leader encourages workers to feel motivated by their jobs (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Business leaders should recognize the values of their employees and identify the external motivators that render the anticipated outcomes

appealing (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Extensive research utilizing expectancy theory, which posits that an individual's motivation is influenced by their confidence in achieving desired results through their efforts, has been conducted to explore the relationship between employee motivation, engagement, and performance (A. Lee et al., 2018; Lui & Quezada, 2019).

When business leaders recognize the factors that impact individual behaviors and motivation, engagement increases, leading to a nurturing environment (Q. Chen et al., 2019; A. Lee et al., 2018). A. Lee et al. (2018) and Q. Chen et al. (2019) observed that employees' efforts to achieve and surpass performance standards may be hindered if senior management fails to define the organization's goals and expectations clearly. Furthermore, the motivation and engagement of employees are likely to wane if business leaders do not consistently evaluate employee behaviors to identify necessary organizational adjustments for maintaining high job performance (Q. Chen et al., 2019; A. Lee et al., 2018).

Intrinsically motivated employees engage in work activities they find valuable and enjoyable. By contrast, extrinsically motivated employees become engaged because they seek a reward. Extrinsic motivation is often employed by toxic leadership (Koc et al., 2022; Semedo et al., 2022). Managers often employ extrinsic rewards to encourage employees to develop new skills and knowledge at work (Hayibor & Collins, 2016). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators must be present in the workplace (Sigaard & Skov, 2015). While extrinsic motivators can enhance job performance, it is also essential for business leaders to assist their employees in finding job responsibilities that provide intrinsic motivation (Hayibor & Collins, 2016; Sigaard & Skov, 2015).

### **Toxic Leader Impact on Employee Retention and Turnover Intent**

Toxic leaders create energy-deprived environments with demoralized workers due to negative leadership (Baloyi, 2020; Webster et al., 2016). Studies have shown that employees become disengaged after working with a toxic leader (Baloyi, 2020; Webster et al., 2016). Baloyi (2020) suggested employee disengagement leads to dissatisfaction, thus impacting employee performance. Fundamentally, employees who balance work with their personal lives tend to remain satisfied in their jobs (Baloyi, 2020). Researchers have asserted that work-life balance, communication, and leadership primarily contribute to the connection between leader and follower (Baloyi, 2020; Webster et al., 2016).

Further research has shown that toxic leadership leads to high employee turnover and failed retention (Bakkal et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2018). When business leaders effectively engage with their employees and supply them with the necessary tools and resources, productivity and profits tend to rise (Heymann, 2015). In contrast, toxic leaders often struggle with communication, leading to diminished employee job satisfaction. Additionally, leaders who cannot maintain high levels of engagement typically experience higher employee turnover, with many employees choosing to seek opportunities elsewhere voluntarily.

The relationship between support systems and employee turnover highlights the detrimental effects of toxic leadership, as a lack of leader support can intensify conflict and contribute to higher turnover rates (Bakkal et al., 2019; Huffman, 2014; Nica, 2014; Singh et al., 2018). Toxic leadership, characterized by a failure to provide organizational support, is linked to increased turnover (Kalidass & Bahron, 2015; Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). Furthermore, toxic leadership can undermine the effectiveness of training initiatives aimed at enhancing job

commitment, as it erodes job satisfaction and increases turnover intention (Kalidass & Bahron, 2015; Kiritu, 2018; Lei et al., 2018; Samaha & Hawi, 2016).

Employee turnover is a significant concern for organizations, and the influence of toxic leadership on turnover behavior is not perfectly understood (Huffman, 2014; Nica, 2014). Toxic leadership exacerbates this issue by negatively impacting individuals and their families, highlighting the importance of leadership style in creating a supportive work environment and retaining employees. Furthermore, toxic leadership and related behaviors have significantly increased employee turnover intent (Bakkal et al., 2019; Nica, 2014; Smith et al., 2019).

### **Military Leader Propensity for Toxicity**

Existing literature on adverse outcomes of toxic leadership focuses on organizations in both public and private sectors, with little research published on toxic leadership in the military (Brandebo et al., 2019; Kayani & Alasan, 2021). Subsequent investigations and research into the causes of toxic leadership are also widespread. However, the overriding question of military experts is why military leaders exhibit harmful leadership behavior that undermines their organization and affects soldiers' well-being (Shufelt & Longenecker, 2017).

Brandebo and Alvinus (2019) and Green (2020) found that military leaders in positions of great responsibility also had inflated egos. A common trait in toxic leaders is a perceived threat to their status, power, or control, often from inflated egos. This perception prompts the leader to become defensive and harbor a sense of vulnerability in their leadership abilities (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019; Green, 2020). Green (2020) examined the influence of personal issues on military leaders functioning in an official capacity, noting that harmful behavioral changes led to detrimental actions.



While there is a broad array of literature regarding toxic leadership focused on all military branches, the current study examines it within the branch of the U.S. Army, as it has many regulations on toxic leadership prevention but very little research addressing the issue. Previous findings have shown that Army leaders' current mood impacted their behavior toward their staff, but the leaders' common characteristics included ethical failure, incompetence, and neurosis (Green, 2020).

### **Current Military Doctrine on Prevention and Protection from Toxic Leaders**

The U.S. Department of the Army (2019) cited that "toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance" (p. 6). Army Regulation 600-100 documented that an officer or other leader's responsibility is to examine their behavior and determine if it is toxic (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017). Researchers have claimed the current self-awareness programs and early training requirements for any Army leaders were implemented to prevent counterproductive and toxic leadership behaviors (Horval, 2020; Saleem et al., 2021). Army programs focus on different harmful behaviors and destructive leadership styles, including incompetent managers with affable nonparticipant traits and toxic, self-centered abusers who treat employees and colleagues with insensitivity (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Molino et al., 2019).

Often, the military overlooks toxic leadership behaviors, claiming that abrasive behavior is an acceptable part of military training (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Matsuda, 2014). However, justifying counterproductive behaviors by a toxic leader toward employees or military personnel is not warranted within the military doctrine. Beum (2020), Matsuda (2014), Dobbs and Do (2019), Trachik et al. (2021), Nock et al. (2017), Hester (2017), and Suitt (2021) claimed reasons for Army suicides were not debt or mental health issues, trouble in childhood, or substance abuse

problems, but toxic leadership. Pressure from within their platoons from a toxic leader pushes soldiers over the edge (Matsuda, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Matsuda (2014) interviewed a sample ( $N = 50$ ) of soldiers who had a fellow service member commit suicide. Many of the responses showed that while most suicide victims were suffering from problems in their personal lives, all victims had toxic leaders (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Matsuda, 2014). When reporting his findings to the Army, Matsuda (2014) claimed that a toxic command climate could trigger suicidal behavior.

Much of the existing quantitative research literature found unhealthy outcomes from toxic leadership. However, research is lacking in subjective critiques of toxic leaders by individuals who are on the receiving end of such harmful behaviors (Burns, 2017; Williard, 2017). In Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, a recently revised section on toxic leadership states that counterproductive leadership stems from a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that adversely affect subordinates, the organization, and mission performance (U.S. Department of the Army 2019). Toxic leaders lack concern for others and the organization's climate, often leading to short- and long-term adverse effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves (Almeida et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2018).

The dysfunctional leader achieves short-term goals by leveraging their positional power, which compels followers to fulfill their requests (Laguda, 2020; Matsuda, 2014; Vasquez et al., 2021; Winn & Dykes, 2019). Their actions might achieve results in the short term but ignore the other leader competency categories. Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale (Wilson, 2014).

This dynamic factor affects the legitimacy of the Army's evaluative process, as soldiers may find it challenging to evaluate their superiors anonymously.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The existing literature reviewed in this chapter discussed topics related to toxic leadership, including the subjectiveness of defining toxic leadership and leadership style as part of the early comparative studies associated with this phenomenon (Dess & Picken, 2000; Z. A. Khan et al., 2016; Pidgeon, 2017). It also covers reasons for toxic leadership behaviors. Additionally, research was found regarding the impact of toxic leadership on employee motivation, engagement, performance, retention, and turnover intent.

Later research assessed toxic leadership in the context of leadership styles and searched for reasons individuals become toxic leaders (Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020; Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019). The study found that the characteristics of transactional, transformational, and authentic leadership impacted toxic leadership behaviors, with a positive relationship observed (Baloyi, 2020; Daniels et al., 2019; Hesbol, 2019; Pizzolitto et al., 2022; Sirin et al., 2018). An in-depth look at each leadership style is necessary to evaluate how leaders affect their followers and the ensuing consequences, not just the transitional outcomes (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

Research has consistently demonstrated the significant effects of leadership on fostering efficacy, empowerment, trust, and identification with either the organization or its leaders (Northouse, 2018; Peng et al., 2020). Northouse (2018) differentiates between transformational leadership, which is ethically driven and aims at societal or institutional transformation, and transactional leadership, which is often marked by superficial transformational qualities and can include corrupt behaviors. This analysis has been foundational in further discussions on authentic

versus inauthentic leadership styles, contributing to a broader understanding of leadership impact, as noted by Bond (2021).

The limited studies on toxic leadership in the military included discussions on the propensity for toxic leadership among military leaders and current military doctrine used to prevent toxic leadership (Brandebø et al., 2019; Green, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021). These studies also related the protective measures the military implemented against toxic leadership; however, the studies were few (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Beum, 2020; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Horval, 2020; Molino et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021; Suitt, 2021; Trachik et al., 2021). The existing research focused on such experiences within the confines of military service only, particularly the association of military personnel perceptions with their experiences of leadership and organizational culture (Fosse et al., 2019; Walker & Watkins, 2020). The variety of leadership styles adds to the complexity of toxicity; leaders exhibit disparaging and dysfunctional behaviors with enduring effects. However, from these perspectives, there is a need to determine methods for preventing and correcting such toxic leadership behaviors. Furthermore, previous studies treated the military as a homogeneous group. Therefore, there is a need for a study focused primarily on the U.S. Army to explore toxic leadership within its structures and its impact on military personnel.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members. A review of the existing literature revealed the importance of leadership and how different leadership styles lend themselves to toxic leadership behaviors (Anjum et al., 2018; Aubrey, 2012; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Bakkal et al, 2019; Baloyi, 2020; Coldwell, 2021; Dagless, 2018;

Dobbs & Do, 2019; Hinen, 2019, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Matsuda, 2014; Milosevic et al., 2020; Mohamed, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2021). Early research showed that the approach to leadership behaviors was less employee-focused and more focused on organizational productivity and success (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Burns, 2017). Two leadership approaches, emic and etic, were found to have different impacts on diverse workforces (Beals et al., 2020; Engler & Whitesides, 2022; Lituchy et al., 2017; Motowlansky & Rota, 2020; Pradipta, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Furthermore, much of the early literature addressed toxic leadership and its impact on workplace culture and cultural values within the boundaries of the interaction between supervisors and employees (Euwema et al., 2007; Kawamoto et al., 2016).

The dark triad theory by Paulhus and Williams (2002) focuses on experiences of toxic leadership. It describes the impact such toxicity has on employees based on three domains: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The three domains are influential characteristics of a toxic leader. Much of the research identified that transactional and inauthentic leaders are prone to initiating toxic behaviors. In contrast, it has been determined that transformational leadership is less likely to enable or lead to harmful behaviors. Studies showed that leadership styles promoting the completion of a task or job based on the leader's leadership method were more effective at countering toxic leadership (Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020; Gemedá & Lee, 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Pidgeon, 2017). However, further research showed that this method effectively increased follower compliance and task completion but not job satisfaction (Barnett, 2018; Gemedá & Lee, 2020).

Toxic leader behaviors stem from the belief that one can influence others to make a difference for their betterment, not the betterment of the employee or organization (Coldwell,

2021; Steinmann et al., 2018). Leadership qualities can be improved by observing outstanding leadership traits, practices, and actions commonly linked with transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership (Mohmed, 2021). This review synthesized the early research on toxic leadership behaviors and leadership models. This research reviewed transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership styles, comparing the traits of these styles with the characteristics of a toxic leader.

Findings from the literature indicated that transactional leaders fear change, are innovation- and creativity-stifled, focus too narrowly on short-term goals, and lack soft skills (Carleton et al., 2018; Duemer, 2017; Hesbol, 2019; Hussain et al., 2017; Lan et al., 2019; Ma & Jiang, 2018; Padmakumar & Dwivedi, 2021; Young et al., 2021). These notable disadvantages of a transactional leader could quickly lead them to form characteristics akin to toxic leadership.

Avolio (2018) argued that transformational leaders are pivotal in fostering innovation and reshaping an organization's culture and vision. However, Flynn and Sylva (2019) and Wren (2018) highlight potential drawbacks, noting that such leaders can exhibit behaviors that may become detrimental. These include a tendency to lose focus, susceptibility to burnout, frequent disruption of established routines, minimal implementation of checks and balances, a constant need for support, and a potential for power misuse.

The general problem is that there remains a high prevalence of toxic leadership in the military despite the plethora of research showing how to detect and remedy this form of destructive behavior (Fosse et al., 2019). The prevalence of toxic leadership in any organization could cause a variety of adverse outcomes for the organization and its employees, including low morale, poor job performance, reduced effectiveness, and decreased psychological, socioemotional, and physical well-being (Burns, 2017). The specific problem is that the

experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes among Army service members are unknown (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

Chapter Three will introduce the qualitative methodology and phenomenological design established and the justification for selecting them for this current study. The chapter will discuss how the researcher collected and analyzed data to answer the research questions. Further, the researcher will present information on the population and sampling, the findings' trustworthiness, and the study's ethical considerations.

## **Chapter Three: Methods**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study investigates the experiences of recently retired U.S. Army service members with toxic leadership. The study involved a sample of 10 participants, with data collection conducted through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Two central research questions guided the study: (a) What are the lived experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members? and (b) What are the perceived adverse outcomes associated with toxic leadership according to recently retired U.S. Army service members? The previous chapter addressed the research literature upon which the study rested, including the theoretical foundations and the research gap motivating the study. Chapter Three discusses the research methods by which the study was conducted.

Chapter Three begins with a discussion of the qualitative methodology, followed by the phenomenological research design. Next, the data collection procedures will be described in detail, followed by the data analysis process and a discussion of research validity. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

### **Design**

The methodology for the study was qualitative. Qualitative research is descriptive and exploratory, appropriate for exploring a broad research phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A qualitative methodology is open-ended in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Because of its open-ended disposition, qualitative research is ideal for exploring new theoretical grounds and ideas that require further exploration within the literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Since qualitative research is subjective, focusing on the opinions and perspectives of the research participants remains critical (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).



This subjectivity makes qualitative study ideal for research that focuses on understanding research participants and their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative inquiry is contextual and looks holistically at the central research topic rather than trying to divorce it from its context and study it in the abstract (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Finally, qualitative research allows the researcher to understand the full range of participants' experiences rather than limiting the results to a predefined set of outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A qualitative method is appropriate for this study for several reasons. Foremost among these is that this study is focused on the subjective experiences of the study participants with toxic leadership, a topic that aligns closely with qualitative research principles because both the study and qualitative research share a subjective focus. Second, the study is exploratory, seeking to develop an under-researched topic further and break new theoretical ground by describing and interpreting toxic leadership through the theoretical framework of the dark triad. Third, the study focuses on a broad research phenomenon rather than narrower research variables. Fourth, toxic leadership is its own phenomenon and is deeply embedded within the context within which it is experienced, making the contextual aspect of the qualitative research method appropriate. Finally, a qualitative approach to research is applicable because the study would benefit from understanding all the potential responses within the study's population, not merely those that align with a predefined set of outcomes.

Within the qualitative research paradigm, to understand lived experiences and phenomena, various methods exist to collect and analyze non-numerical data. The specific research approach for the study is phenomenological, a research style developed from the philosophy of the same name (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological research, the objective is to understand the lived experiences of the study participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). By

analyzing the lived experiences, researchers can extract the essence, offering a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the research participants (Moustakas, 1994).

When considering the characteristics of qualitative research designs, researchers must reflect on the in-depth approach of phenomenological study that allows the researcher to obtain substantive data from fewer participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). An essential feature of phenomenological data is how they confer a very personable perspective on the research design and deeply explore the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this regard, phenomenology capitalizes further on qualitative inquiry's subjective and participant-oriented nature (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

A phenomenological research design is appropriate to the study for several reasons. First, individuals experiencing toxic leadership undergo a complicated and deeply personal journey. Therefore, researchers can best understand this experience through a research design that permits an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences. In addition, one's experience with toxic leadership is not always immediately evident. In that regard, it is perhaps more easily accessed through the analysis of lived experiences than through more direct research approaches.

Furthermore, the phenomenological research approach's depth and fruitfulness allowed the participants and the researcher to develop rapport. This newly found bond enables participants to feel more comfortable discussing complex and potentially traumatic experiences associated with serving under a toxic leader. Finally, the experience of toxic leadership is highly subjective and may vary considerably among participants. Hence, an especially subjectively oriented qualitative research design aligns closely with the nature of toxic leadership as a research topic. In prior research, researchers have also used phenomenology to address toxic

leadership. For example, Hoffman and Sergio (2020) explored how lived experiences of toxic leadership affected future readiness for innovation. Black (2015) also used phenomenology to offer an in-depth look at how their husbands' lived experiences of toxic leadership affected the wives of Army officers.

Per van Manen and van Manen (2021), interpretive phenomenology should generally be conducted through an interpretive conceptual lens. This lens primarily serves to facilitate understanding the results based on the overall domain in which the study was conducted (Jedličková et al., 2022). This interpretive framework evolves during the research and analysis process (Jedličková et al., 2022). The interpretive lens rests upon the conceptual framework of Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triangle, also known as the dark triad. However, the dark triad framework evolved throughout the study; new components were added as needed.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** What are the experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members?

**RQ2:** What are the perceived adverse outcomes derived among recently retired U.S. Army service members and their experiences with toxic leadership?

### **Setting**

The research was conducted in person and virtually, without being confined to a specific physical setting. Participant recruitment took place through organizations such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars and social media groups on Facebook or LinkedIn. These varied locations, encompassing physical and virtual spaces, created an inclusive setting for retired U.S. Army service members.

### **Participants**

One of my research's most crucial steps was defining the participants' profiles. This ensures that I attracted and recruited individuals who could provide the most appropriate insights into the experiential effects of toxic leadership, thereby enhancing the relevance and quality of the study. Primary recruitment methods were word-of-mouth and social media. The population from which data were collected for the study was retired U.S. Army service members.

Within this broader population, the targeted population was retired U.S. Army members who experienced toxic leadership in the Army. Therefore, the study includes participants who (a) have experienced toxic leadership in the U.S. Army within the last 5 years, (b) are 18 years old or older, and (c) have recently retired from the U.S. Army (within the past 4 years). These inclusion criteria ensured that all prospective participants could contribute recent personal experiences to the study of toxic leadership in the context of the U.S. Army.

Within the target population, participants were sampled purposively. Purposive sampling focuses on identifying participants whose specific backgrounds or experiences ensure they can contribute to answering the research questions that guide the study (Campbell et al., 2020). Qualitative sample sizes cannot be determined in advance (Mason, 2010) because qualitative research relies on saturation or the point at which new participants add no new data (Mason, 2010). Phenomenology also imposes the additional constraint that the sample size should not be so large that the voices of the individual study participants are lost (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Considering these considerations, I initially targeted a sample size of eight to 12 participants, ultimately selecting 10 to ensure data saturation.

### **Procedures**

Before data collection began, I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B) approval to address potential issues. Participants were recruited from various sources such as local chapters of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars and social media groups on platforms like Facebook targeting Army veterans and those recently discharged. Authorization was obtained from these sources before distributing recruitment materials.

The recruitment materials (Appendix C) included a flyer that was used both physically and virtually. The flyer outlined the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and the potential benefits of the research to the military community. It also provided contact details so interested participants could contact the researcher. Prospective participants were screened through a brief questionnaire (Appendix D) via phone or email to verify eligibility. Those who met the criteria were given informed consent information, which detailed the study's objectives, participation requirements, and privacy protections. Interviews were scheduled with participants who signed and returned the consent form.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The role of the researcher in this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of recently retired U.S. Army service members with toxic leadership. Primarily, the researcher was an observer in the study. As such, the researcher engaged the study participants through virtual and face-to-face interviews. The researcher ensured that the participants had a comfortable setting during the interviews to allow them to share their experiences openly. Throughout the study, the researcher observed objectivity and professionalism. The researcher in this study did not have a prior or ongoing relationship with the study's participants. Through this

aspect, the researcher avoided potential preconceptions regarding the respondents' perceived experiences. In this case, it was possible to eliminate potential researcher bias.

Nevertheless, the researcher used a bracketing approach to highlight possible personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases that could affect the study's objectivity. Bracketing is recommended in research studies because it ensures that data collection, analysis, and interpretation accurately reflects the perspectives shared by the participants rather than the researcher's expectations or assumptions (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Furthermore, the researcher used reflexive techniques such as peer debriefing and reflective journals (Appendix E) to avoid potential bias, critically examine participants' shared information, and promote an ethical, inclusive, and respectful research environment.

Broadly, the researcher recognized the importance of upholding ethical standards during the study. As such, to navigate considerable ethical requirements, the researcher issued the study participants with informed consent before the study commenced. Informed consent (Appendix F) is imperative in research as it details the study purpose, objectives, and the role of the participants while clarifying how confidentiality and possible harm to the respondents would be addressed (Xu et al., 2020). The researcher informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions. Additionally, the researcher used pseudonyms to ensure the participants' privacy, eliminating the risks of any identifiable information of the respondents being exposed.

### **Data Collection**

This study sought to understand the experiences of recently retired U.S. Army service members with toxic leadership. Therefore, the researcher aimed to utilize a data collection method that could allow the participants to provide elaborate and detailed perspectives about

their lived experiences of toxic leadership in the military. Specifically, this study relied on semi-structured interviews conducted virtually to collect data.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were the primary data collection method for the study. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes with each participant. All interviews were conducted in person, through virtual teleconferencing software, at a time of the participant’s preference. The interviews used a semi-structured approach and were conducted using an interview guide. The guide was prepared and validated by the dissertation committee and IRB, as indicated by Kallio et al. (2016). The interview guide consists of approximately 15 questions and five prompts to structure the interview (Appendix G). However, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up, probing, or clarifying questions.

The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data was professionally transcribed. Participants were permitted to review their interview transcripts individually to ensure completeness and correctness. In addition, if participants wished to withdraw, they had the option to contact the researcher at any point before publication of the dissertation. The confidentiality of participants is maintained by using code names and eliminating any identifiable information from the data. All data will be stored securely for 5 years following the study’s publication and then deleted entirely.

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretive phenomenological data analysis, as laid out by Jedličková et al. (2022), was completed for this study. Qualitative data analysis software was used to analyze the information. The software coding was completed through NVivo after hand-coding was complete. Interpretive

phenomenological analysis (IPA) represents a process for reducing qualitative data to their essence.

Per Jedličková et al. (2022), the first step of an IPA is to develop a deep familiarity with the data. This step is accomplished by carefully reviewing the complete set of transcripts multiple times. This step serves to ground the analysis in the data. In the second step, the researcher must make notes. These notes help to characterize the “descriptive, linguistic and conceptual characteristics of the interview” (Jedličková et al., 2022, p. 93). This process of annotating the results is similar to coding the data. The key is to identify and understand the meaning given to concepts, events, and other things by the study participant rather than the meaning outwardly imposed by the researcher. Once the commentating and annotating of the data are complete, step three will identify emergent themes (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Themes are essential ideas that contain more meaning than codes. Themes are often determined by looking at the occurrence and co-occurrence of different codes across the dataset and identifying patterns of meaning.

Though not part of Jedličková et al.’s (2022) interpretive analysis framework, to strengthen the validity of the findings, they were verified once the themes were developed (Clarke et al., 2015). This step involves validating each theme against the data. The validation step ensures that the themes faithfully represent the data. Next, the themes must be checked against each other (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Comparing and contrasting the themes for overlap and conflict remains essential to achieving the depth that IPA requires (Jedličková et al., 2022).



### **Trustworthiness**

Ensuring the trustworthiness of a study is imperative in research across all fields. Nowell et al. (2017) state that trustworthiness reflects the reliability of the study's processes, spanning data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of findings. Furthermore, Korstjens and Moser (2018) suggest several dimensions to enhance a research study's trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the degree to which the study's findings truthfully represent the realities expressed by the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Nowell et al. (2017) argue that credibility is influenced by the depth of data collected and the analytical skills of the researcher. This study employs the phenomenological method of explication to enhance credibility. According to van Manen and van Manen (2021), explication involves a detailed description articulating participants' views, strengthening the credibility of phenomenological research by demonstrating that the findings are deeply rooted in participants' thorough and complete responses.

Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that a phenomenological study must accurately reflect the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions. Accordingly, the researcher engaged in bracketing, a critical method for maintaining credibility, by identifying and setting aside personal biases or preconceived notions about the research topic (Bednall, 2006). Further, the researcher practiced epoché, suspending these biases to view the study purely through the participants' perspectives, thus ensuring that personal biases did not influence the study's conclusions (Chan et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Similar to reliability, dependability, and confirmability are imperative aspects of qualitative research. Korstjens and Moser (2018) asserted that dependability and confirmability in quantitative research are crucial for addressing consistency issues. They recommend that researchers achieve this by thoroughly describing the study's context and setting. Furthermore, Adler (2022) stated that dependability entails the extent to which the study could be repeated and yield similar results by a different researcher. This study includes a comprehensive explanation of the research procedures to ensure dependability. Moreover, confirmability ensures that data collected and analyzed are based solely on the perspectives and experiences shared by the study participants, not the researcher's assumptions or biases (Amin et al., 2020). In this study, confirmability was achieved through a reflexive journal recommended by Nowell et al. (2017).

### **Transferability**

Furthermore, transferability establishes trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As Nowell et al. (2017) stated, transferability is similar to generalizability and ensures the likelihood of replicating study findings in other settings, populations, times, and contexts. In qualitative phenomenological research, ensuring transferability involves carefully documenting the research process, including how the participants were chosen and other procedures used to further the study's goal, as recommended by Korstjens and Moser (2018). The researcher provided detailed and rich descriptions of the study methods, participants, and procedures in this study to ensure transferability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher took various measures to ensure that ethical standards were upheld during the study. All the participants were issued informed consent explaining their rights, role in the study, and ability to opt out of the study at any point in time without any consequences. The researcher ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms rather than their actual names. Furthermore, the researcher debriefed the participants at the end of each interview session to address any potential concerns or questions that they might raise.

During the study, I maintained objectivity and an open mind. This aspect aimed to ensure that the research findings reflected the perceived experiences shared by the participants to represent their direct views rather than the researcher's preconceptions. The researcher accorded all the participants equal chances to participate in the study while using a reflexive journal and bracketing to avoid possible biases. The researcher maintained a respectful attitude towards all participants throughout the study. Furthermore, a safe and comfortable research environment was maintained while conducting the semi-structured interviews.

The researcher acknowledged the likelihood of data leakage and misuse, which could potentially harm the study participants. The researcher stored participants' information and associated data on a password-protected computer in encrypted folders; all documents containing participants' data are kept in a password-protected cabinet in the researcher's office.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three describes the research methods for the study. This qualitative phenomenological research study aims to explore the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service

members through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Phenomenology is the approach that best aligns with the purpose of this qualitative research design because of the broad, subjective topic.

A phenomenological research design was chosen because it aligns with the nature of the topic and the focus on lived experiences. The population from which data for the study were collected was retired U.S. Army service members. Within this broader population, the targeted population was retired U.S. Army members who have experienced toxic leadership in the Army. Within the target population, participants were sampled purposively.

This study utilized a sample of 10 participants. Interviews were the primary data collection method for the study. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, 60–90 minutes with each participant, and audio-recorded and transcribed. The resulting data were analyzed through the lens of the toxic triad using IPA. Several measures ensured validity, especially phenomenological bracketing and explication. Trustworthiness was achieved through extra steps in the analysis and efforts to ensure transferability. In the next chapter, Chapter Four, the results of this study are presented.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### Overview

The findings presented in this chapter add to the body of knowledge on detecting and avoiding toxic leadership in the military. This interpretive phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Specifically, 10 U.S. Army veterans who retired within the last 5 years were purposively sampled for this study. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** What are the experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members?

**RQ2:** What are the perceived adverse outcomes derived among recently retired U.S. Army service members and their experiences with toxic leadership?

This chapter describes each participant's profile to provide a context for the idiographic themes that emerged from the individual transcripts. The results section is organized into two parts. The first part describes the theme development process, which includes reports of how the codes were identified from the data to generate idiographic themes and how the idiographic themes were linked by common patterns in the data to form emergent and superordinate themes. The second part contains a write-up of the findings using a structure based on the superordinate themes. The detailed content includes a narrative derived from the emergent themes and supporting excerpts from the data. A summary concludes this chapter.

### Participants

The participants of this study were 10 retired U.S. Army service members. All of the participants self-reported having experienced toxic leadership in the U.S. Army within the last 5

years, were over the age of 18, and had retired from the Army within the past 5 years.

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to maintain their confidentiality. The sample consisted of seven males, two females, and one individual identifying not with gender but as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. The following sub-sections contain each participant's profile information, including their length of military service, positions, specializations, why they joined the Army, and why they left the service. These profiles offer insight into the process of identifying unique idiographic themes from each transcript.

### **AJ**

AJ served in the Army for 20 years. He joined the military after graduating from college and after the 9/11 attacks. Before retirement, AJ held several positions, including platoon leader, company commander, battalion support operations, battalion commander, and lieutenant colonel. AJ was a career soldier who served at eight different duty stations. He specialized in logistics; he commanded various units ranging from platoons to battalion-sized elements. AJ stated that serving in the military was his "best decision." AJ, having been married for 2 years, opted to retire and concentrate on his family despite being selected for promotion to colonel. He explained, "I saw what a life of service can do to soldiers and their families, and I didn't want to put my family through that."

### **CSM**

CSM retired after 23 years of military service as a command sergeant major. He was a noncommissioned officer (NCO) who served in leadership roles from team leader to battalion sergeant major. Initially, he did not plan to join the Army, but in 2000, he felt obligated to marry his pregnant girlfriend to support his family financially. He loved serving in the Army and would return to a life of service if the country got involved in war or major conflict. However, he retired

after his son enlisted, as he felt he was passing on the torch. CSM shared his experiences of witnessing and adapting to several transformations in the military over the years. He perceived that newly enlisted soldiers were adept at using the Army's regulatory guidance to manipulate their way to achieve personal gain. CSM described military service as challenging and requiring resilience, emotional intelligence, and adaptability.

### **Fred**

Fred is in his late 30s. He served in three different Army units for over 12 years before he retired to pursue personal and family goals. Fred joined the Army after dropping out of college. His sense of duty toward the country strengthened after the 9/11 attacks. Fred shared that all his friends had enlisted then, and he felt it was the right thing to do.

### **George**

George grew up in a military family, with his grandfather and father being military veterans. However, his father discouraged him from enlisting when he graduated high school. His father wanted him to be an officer. His father shared "horror stories" about the military, and thus, he knew what to expect. George enlisted when he moved out. He specialized in information technology. George promised himself that as a leader, he would initiate the changes he had wanted as a subordinate. He realized that the problem with military leaders was embedded in the culture. George was an active-duty soldier for 6 years. He left the Army when he began to realize that the stories his father told him about the Army were starting to become a reality. George never deployed to war during active duty but made good friends and had some great experiences.

### **Jessica**

Jessica shared that she had beautiful and painful experiences during her 20 years in the Army. She described herself as "a tomboy" and joined the Army when her sense of patriotism

was triggered during the 9/11 attacks. Jessica shared that her father raised her to stand up for what is right. She did not know anyone in the Army before joining and did not know what to expect during her service. She experienced unequal treatment of female soldiers. She was deployed twice for 9 months each time. She decided to leave the Army to spend more time with her family. Her highest position before retirement was sergeant first class.

## **JJ**

JJ had always aspired to join the military, inspired by tales of valor and camaraderie. However, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, he initially hesitated to enlist due to concerns about potential ostracization. His resolve strengthened when the Army began actively recruiting individuals who were openly gay, allowing JJ to pursue his dream career. After serving in the Army for five years, JJ ultimately decided to leave due to encounters with homophobic individuals.

## **JT**

JT was in the Army for 10 years and was medically discharged because he sustained an injury from an accident during training. He was deployed twice; the total duration was 13 months. JT was a helicopter mechanic, and he believed that he was good at his job. He joined the military to prevent himself from ending up in jail or facing an early death. JT perceived that hazing was a typical experience in the military for those who wanted to be promoted. He shared that he "thought nothing of it, " endured the hardships, and achieved his goals. JT believed that he avoided being abused by leaders because he was of imposing stature.

## **Owen**

After serving 13 years, Owen completed his military duty and was discharged as a first-class sergeant. He had six assignments. He was born into a military family but felt he was



unprepared to enlist when he was in his early adulthood. Owen is currently married with one child. After considering his family's needs and the importance of being there to support them, he decided to leave the military. Owen concluded that promotion would take a long time and that there were better income-generating opportunities in the civilian setting. However, Owen shared that he had mostly positive experiences in the military. His reported experiences of hazing did not involve being physically or verbally abused. He has a good relationship with his leaders and his comrades.

### **Sarah**

Sarah left her teaching job to join the military. When Sarah joined the army, she planned to obtain a master's degree, travel, and be an advocate for feminism. She believed she possessed the leadership qualities needed in the military. She was taught by her father to "be larger than life." Before enlisting, Sarah embraced the idea of a challenging experience in the military. She anticipated that, as a woman, she would encounter more difficulties in a male-dominated organization. She was in the Army for 6 years. During this time, she was not deployed. She left when she perceived that she had achieved her goals and had no more room for growth in the military.

### **Tex**

Tex enjoys hunting and other outdoor activities. He expressed pride in being a combat veteran, having been deployed for nine months. He retired from the Army after 6 years of service. Tex shared that he was from a small town with nothing else to do, so he enlisted. He was almost dissuaded from enlisting because the recruitment center was 2 hours away from his town. However, Tex unexpectedly met recruiters at a recruitment booth where they offered "free stuff"

and an enlistment bonus. Tex shared mostly positive experiences while in the Army but had a negative experience with one team leader.

## **Results**

This section contains the presentation of the results. The write-up begins with descriptions of how the themes emerged from the data per the IPA, as Jedličková et al. (2022) laid out. NVivo version 14 was a helpful tool for coding and annotating the data. The details of the IPA steps applied to the data are highlighted in the theme development sub-section. The resulting emergent and superordinate themes are described under the corresponding research question.

### **Theme Development**

The IPA steps began with developing a deep familiarity with the data. I conducted individual interviews and transcribed the data. Still, I immersed myself in the transcripts with repeated reading to gain thorough familiarity. During this phase, I practiced bracketing, which involved reflecting on and documenting my assumptions about toxic leadership and its associated adverse outcomes in the U.S. Army.

I used a reflexivity journal to record my expected outcomes and prior knowledge based on my own Army experience. I referred to these notes during the annotation and theme development processes to maintain awareness about potential biases and minimize subjectivity in the analysis. The first IPA step resulted in my understanding of the overall patterns in the dataset. I moved to the next step, which was annotation.

The second IPA step involved the use of NVivo 14. I imported all the transcripts and meticulously analyzed each line to identify statements reflecting the participants' encounters with toxic leadership and its negative consequences. Reading the transcripts line-by-line was essential

to understand the meanings given by the participants to their experiences. The lines with meaningful and relevant content were annotated with short descriptors or codes. A sampling of codes and quotes from the transcripts is provided in Table 1. The complete list of codes with corresponding samples of supporting quotes from the data is provided in Appendix A.

**Table 1**

*Sample Codes*

Code	Quotes
The blurred line between discipline and abuse	In the early years, the line between discipline and toxicity was blurred.
Exploitative for personal agenda	In my case, they are controlling, petty, and more focused on achieving their personal objectives.
Looked up to leaders	I had intelligent, talented, experienced leaders.
Gender discrimination	It was an evident display of his disapproval and lack of respect for my sexual orientation.
Doubted oneself	I am constantly anxious about my performance, always having to self-evaluate if I'm within the expected standards.
Felt powerless	Psychologically, it led to . . . a feeling of powerlessness.
Left the military	Soldiers who are afraid to come to work because of their toxic leaders can face significant challenges in their military careers and personal well-being.
Migraines	Physically, I experienced severe stress and anxiety that affected my sleep and caused excruciating migraines.

The third IPA step was to identify emergent themes. Emergent themes were derived from the occurrence and co-occurrence of codes depicting a similar idea (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). I allowed the emergent themes to inductively develop from the patterns in the data while using Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triangle discussed in Chapter Two as a guide in naming the concepts. Inductive development of the emergent themes involved using the data from the transcripts. Thus, NVivo 14 was again valuable in the process. I created a code hierarchy in which the higher level represented the emergent theme. In comparison, the lower level represented the codes with similar patterns. The 10 emergent themes with their supporting codes are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Emergent Themes*

Emergent theme	Codes
Military culture favors structure and hierarchy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The blurred line between discipline and abuse</li> <li>2. Lack of accountability</li> <li>3. Pressured to conform</li> </ol>
Experiences with self-centered leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Egotistic</li> <li>2. Exploitative for personal agenda</li> <li>3. Insensitive</li> </ol>
Mixed experiences with leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can have differences but not toxic</li> <li>2. Had a good relationship with leaders</li> <li>3. Looked up to leaders</li> <li>4. Short leadership terms</li> </ol>
Experiences with manipulative leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Abusing authority</li> <li>2. Belittling and using derogatory language</li> <li>3. Gender discrimination</li> <li>4. Passive aggressive comments</li> </ol>
Avoided behaviors considered toxic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Changed oneself to foster healthy leadership</li> <li>2. Embraced new mindset</li> </ol>
Experienced stress and anxiety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Doubted oneself</li> <li>2. Drained</li> <li>3. Feared of retaliation</li> <li>4. Feared punishment</li> <li>5. Felt powerless</li> <li>6. Have lasting trauma</li> <li>7. Mental debilitation when comrades are at risk</li> <li>8. Reached the point of suicidal ideation</li> </ol>
Job dissatisfaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Left the military</li> </ol>
Physical impacts of stress and anxiety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Elevated cortisol levels</li> <li>2. High blood pressure</li> <li>3. Lack of sleep</li> <li>4. Migraines</li> </ol>
Poor relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Withdrawn</li> </ol>
Shattered trust and morale	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Engage in self-preservation rather than team spirit</li> <li>2. Undermining teammates</li> </ol>

In addition to the IPA steps presented by Jedličková et al. (2022), two more steps were undertaken in this study. The fourth data analysis step was to review and validate the themes

according to the recommendations of Clarke et al. (2015). Theme validation involved cross-referencing the themes and the data. This step aimed to minimize bias and ensure that the findings were derived from the data. I checked that the names of the themes were as close to the participants' words as possible. The fifth step was to compare and contrast the themes against each other (Clarke et al., 2015). The purpose of this step was to check whether each theme was unique and not overlapping. During this step, I defined the scope of each theme and discovered overlapping meaning patterns. I combined the overlapping themes and renamed them to capture the idea they represented. These themes served as the final superordinate themes that form the report's results structure in the following sub-sections. As an overview, Table 3 contains the emergent and superordinate themes and their definitions.

**Table 3**

*Superordinate Themes*

Emergent theme	Superordinate theme	Definition of superordinate theme
Military culture favors structure and hierarchy	The structure and hierarchy of the military culture enable toxic leaders	Descriptions of military culture are based on experiences of stern adherence to the chain of command and an emphasis on obeying superiors.
Experiences with self-centered leaders Mixed experiences with leaders	Toxic leaders lack regard for soldiers	Experiences of leaders' centeredness on personal gain and agenda with the lack of consideration for the well-being of soldiers
Experiences with manipulative leaders	Toxic leaders exhibit oppressive misuse of authority	Experiences of abuse from leaders who leverage their power and position
Experienced stress and anxiety Avoided behaviors considered toxic	Experiences of toxic leadership in the military have lasting impacts on an individual	Adverse physical, mental, and emotional outcomes of toxic leadership that are not easily addressed
Job dissatisfaction Physical impacts of stress and anxiety Poor relationships Shattered trust and morale	Experiences of toxic leadership have adverse effects on team dynamics	Adverse outcomes of toxic leadership on interactions with the group

***Superordinate Theme 1: The Structure and Hierarchy of the Military Culture Enables Toxic Leaders***

The first superordinate theme contains elements contributed by all 10 participants across 52 occurrences. The theme revealed the participants' collective experiences with the military culture, emphasizing adherence to the chain of command and obedience to superiors. The sole emergent theme under this superordinate theme was that the army's culture favors structure and hierarchy.

**Emergent Theme 1: Military Culture Favors Structure and Hierarchy.** All 10 participants encountered some instances of toxic leadership, which are intrinsically connected to military culture's inherent structure and hierarchy. According to all the participants, the structure and hierarchy in the military culture is the chain of command. This chain of command is the construct through which high-ranking officers, NCOs, and low-ranking soldiers give orders and decisions that must be complied with. Jessica stated,

I think the primary way military culture can create an environment where toxic leaders thrive is through one of the most essential things that cause the military to exist; the chain of command and hierarchy. The chain of command structure can sometimes allow toxic leaders to exploit their positions of authority, as subordinates may be less likely to question or report their behavior.

In addition to Jessica, three other participants also stated that subordinates were expected to obey their leaders or face punishment according to the structure and hierarchy of the military.

The participants also perceived that the structure and hierarchy of the military can intimidate soldiers and prevent them from reporting the abuse committed by toxic leaders due to fear of punishment and retaliation. CSM stated, "The hierarchy, obedience, and the high-stress

environment can stifle voices and soldier's concerns." Fred shared, "Military culture can inadvertently foster toxic leadership by emphasizing hierarchy, conformity, and unquestioning obedience. The rigid chain of command can discourage subordinates from reporting misconduct." Fred added that the military promotes the value of team cohesion. Fred, along with JJ and Tex, perceived that reporting a leader would affect the team's cohesion. JJ stated,

The military has agendas like building strong and ready teams. I was afraid that people would conflate a SHARP [Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention] or [Equal Opportunity] report as a disruption to the team's cohesion. This fear is another example of how the Army's hierarchy and authority can foster an environment where toxic leadership thrives. The emphasis on obedience and order sometimes eclipses the need for empathy and respect.

AJ and Sarah perceived that the military structure and hierarchy enabled toxic leadership and prevented soldiers from reporting toxic leaders because of the soldiers' unwillingness to go through the bureaucracy. AJ described the structure as "slow and inefficient, primarily because of bureaucracy." AJ added that leaving the military because of experiences with toxic leadership was not effortless because of contractual obligations. AJ stated, "You can't just walk off the job. You have a contractual obligation to serve and will be held accountable if you violate the terms of your contract. Soldiers who encounter counterproductive leadership are forced to endure this toxic environment." Sarah, based on personal experience, explained,

I never said anything about the major in my case because I could stand up for myself. I knew a violation of the Army's policy required filing a report and the process that would ensue if my report triggered an investigation. The unfortunate truth is I didn't want to

deal with it. I think that is the same for many soldiers who suffer from leadership toxicity... It can be a... [time-consuming] process.

Nine participants said a lack of accountability within the military's culture enabled toxic leadership and caused leaders to continue or escalate their abusive behaviors and actions. At most, leaders would be dismissed, but often, toxic leaders received "a slap on the wrist," as Jessica said, or "swept under the rug," as JT noted. The sanction for toxic leaders often involved being transferred to another unit or moved to another section within the same unit. In Owen's experience, his toxic leader was not punished, period: "The funny thing is that the commander was never relieved of his duty or reprimanded—written or oral." Tex believed accountability was different in the military and civilian settings. Tex articulated how toxic individuals would have been outcasts in the civilian setting and how illegal actions would have required civilians to answer to law enforcement. In the military setting, toxic leaders often get away with abuse due to the victims being hesitant or afraid to report due to the fear of retaliation from the leader or other members of their team. Tex detailed,

He couldn't get away with this behavior in the civilian world. I would have reported him, or someone would have said something. He would have gone viral, especially in the era of smartphones and cancel culture. Or I would sue the company. The military's hierarchal structure is tricky. Even though there are reporting channels to report toxic behavior, there's always a risk of repercussions. Not necessarily from him, but maybe from his followers or someone else from his "in-crowd."

Five participants noted that soldiers feared repercussions because discipline in the military culture can be similar to abuse. CSM says, "The line between discipline and toxicity can easily become blurred. I recall instances where the toughness turned into unnecessary



harshness.” CSM, as well as George, perceived that punishment was inherent to the military culture. Because of the top-down structure and hierarchy, punishments could be unfair to low-ranking individuals. George stated, “Punishment is a part of the military culture, and the punishment is often not adjudicated fairly.” Fred noted that within the military framework, leaders who possess the authority under the Uniform Code of Military Justice have the discretion to impose disciplinary actions on their subordinates: “The military structure intensifies the consequences. . . . You can be punished for anything from being late or missing a military vessel.”

### ***Superordinate Theme 2: Toxic Leaders Lack Regard for Soldiers***

All 10 participants shared their experiences with leaders they considered toxic because of their lack of regard for others, especially their subordinates. All the participants described that, based on their encounters, toxic leaders were self-centered and egocentric. Seven participants, however, shared that not all leaders in the military were toxic. The participants had a mix of good and bad experiences. Thus, the emergent themes “experiences with self-centered leaders” and “mixed experiences with leaders” were generated from the data and support the second superordinate theme.

**Emergent Theme 1: Experiences With Self-Centered Leaders.** All 10 participants shared their belief that a toxic leader is self-centered. Based on their experiences, the participants shared that a self-centered leader is insensitive, egotistical, and exploitative. In the participants’ experience, insensitivity was characterized by disregard for others’ well-being, lack of empathy toward others, and dismissiveness of others. CSM shared, “They would instill fear rather than respect, be unapproachable, and lack empathy. Their focus is on results, not on the well-being of their team.” The participants elucidated that self-centered leaders were willing to risk their

subordinates' well-being and lives. AJ stated, "As I said, some officers only care about the mission. They are selfish to the point where their decisions are based solely on what it takes to accomplish the mission." Fred stated that the Army promotes a "people first" approach. Still, in his experience, self-centered leaders were insensitive and unconcerned with their subordinates' well-being. Fred explained, "They may be overly controlling, dismissive of others' opinions, and driven by their ego rather than a genuine concern for their team's success and welfare." AJ shared a specific experience of speaking up to his leader with concern for his and his comrades' safety. However, the self-centered leader dismissed him because his suggestions would risk the success of a training mission. AJ shared,

I remember him ordering us to conduct convoy operations without proper route clearance at a time when IEDs [improvised exploded devices] were rampant. I present[ed] options and explain the risks to soldiers' lives and the possible repercussions to assist in achieving his objectives. But he was adamant about accomplishing the mission at any cost.

Owen's experience was not linked to a mission but to showing up to work. He shared that a fellow soldier was having personal problems. Owen escalated the issue to their commander to help his fellow soldier, "Sid." The commander dismissed him without regard for Sid's safety. Sid ended up attempting to take his own life. Owen blamed their commander for lacking empathy and being selfish. Owen stated,

The commander never once spoke to him [Sid] about it, and we've been briefing him, letting him know to look at it, yet he never seemed worried. Our commander would say things like, "I don't care as long as he shows up to work and he does his job, there are no issues, etc." I remember the day vividly... I got a call from Sid... I heard the familiar

sound of a weapon charging, and before I could say anything, I heard a loud bang! I instantly knew that Sid had shot himself over the phone right then and there... You may think that this is just how he leads as a commander and that his leadership style doesn't qualify as toxic. But this commander showed no emotion to the situation that one of his soldiers had just attempted suicide. He had absolutely no concern for the welfare of the other impacted soldiers.

Six participants stated that their self-centered leaders were also egotistical. The leaders were arrogant and thought highly of themselves. CSM said, "He was just an egotistic [obscene]. . . They fail to recognize the strength in adaptability, empathy, and fostering a trusting environment." George was subordinate to a leader with selfish priorities, which were "uncharacteristic for military units," where team cohesion was valued. George elaborated, "They were bullies who used fear as a tool and couldn't accept constructive criticism."

Four participants disclosed that self-centered leaders were also exploitative in achieving their agenda. Sarah stated, "In my opinion, toxic leadership involves leaders who abuse their position for selfish gain or satisfaction." Tex experienced being excluded from his team because he would not give in to supporting his leader's personal goals. Tex stated, "In my case, they are controlling, petty, and more focused on achieving their personal objectives. I wasn't one of the guys, so I was treated like an outsider." George's leaders sabotaged him because he went against their agenda. George shared, "I had a tough time dealing with NCOs who seemingly had a personal agenda. I worked for two NCOs who were threatened by me, took credit for my work, and did everything to keep me down."

**Emergent Theme 2: Mixed Experiences with Leaders.** Seven participants shared that they had mixed experiences with leaders in the military. The participants specified that toxic

leaders were not a prominent presence in the Army; to the contrary, the Army had exceptional leaders within its ranks whom subordinates could look up to or emulate. George explained, “I’m not saying that all my leaders were terrible; as a matter of fact, I had some very upstanding leaders.” In the experiences of JJ and Sarah, the good outweighed the bad. However, the impacts of toxic leaders were more severe than the impacts of good experiences. Sarah shared, “I had a mixed experience. I traveled, learned new skills, and made lifelong friends. However, I also encountered challenges related to gender bias and toxic leadership, which sometimes overshadowed the positive aspect of my service.” JJ met “intelligent, talented, experienced leaders” but ultimately left the military because of one toxic leader who was homophobic and discriminated against him, JJ revealed,

I had a squad leader from Alabama; he was a self-proclaimed “redneck.” His indirect jokes and comments were palpable; he didn’t hesitate to call people “[obscene].” If you couldn’t lift an object, run fast, or complete any task that required so-called “masculinity,” you were “[obscene].” It was an evident display of his disapproval and lack of respect for my sexual orientation.

Fred stated that he had the “privilege” of having supportive leaders but also served under toxic leaders. Fred said, “There were instances of what I would consider toxic leadership, which cast a shadow over my overall experience.” Tex shared similar experiences with toxic leadership that “marred” his good memories in the military.

### ***Superordinate Theme 3: Toxic Leaders Exhibit Oppressive Misuse of Authority***

Nine of the 10 participants supported the third superordinate theme across 40 occurrences. The participants perceived that the oppressive misuse of authority was characteristic

of a manipulative, toxic leader. The emergent theme in this superordinate theme was the participants' experiences with manipulative leaders.

**Emergent Theme 1: Experiences With Manipulative Leaders.** Nine of the 10 participants reported experiencing oppressive misuse of authority by manipulative leaders. The participants stated that toxic leaders tended to abuse their authority. AJ, Jessica, and JT shared that their leaders violated the Army's core values by manipulating subordinates. Jessica detailed,

Toxic leadership can contradict the Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, and personal courage. In my experience, I have observed that toxic leaders can also exhibit sexist behaviors. This type of leadership can create an unhealthy work environment.

The CSM stated that this type of behavior involves manipulation, intimidation, and a lack of accountability for the leader's actions.

In the Army, all behaviors counterproductive to good order and discipline can affect soldiers. AJ shared an incident with a manipulative leader who threatened subordinates using their performance evaluations. AJ shared, "That's another way leaders leverage their position and further toxic behavior. NCOs and officers give annual evaluations that can impact your future in the military."

Three participants shared that toxic leaders abused their authority by manipulating their subordinates through exclusion. JJ stated, "Discriminatory comments, favoritism, misuse of authority, and emotional manipulation are hallmarks of toxic leadership. It creates an environment of fear and exclusion." CSM and JT shared that toxic leaders excluded subordinates when they did not submit to hazing. JT shared,

You know how we say in the military, “Drink the Kool-Aid?” Well, I drank Kool-Aid. I wanted to become a leader in the Army, so I gave 110% to everything I did. Before becoming an NCO, I experienced a period of hazing and endured challenging leadership.

Toxic leaders also abuse their authority by mistreating subordinates simply because they can. JT stated, “They demonstrate abusive behavior, like verbally or physically abusing their subordinates.” In the experience of five participants, leaders abused their authority by belittling their subordinates. George stated, “They would order us to do petty tasks and called us demeaning names like ‘dumb private’ and talk behind our backs.” George and Sarah described hearing passive-aggressive remarks from toxic leaders who belittled them. Sarah shared,

He never did anything blatant or overtly offensive, but he would say stuff like, “Come on, Sarah, get that fat ass up here.” He would justify this language by saying that he’s old school, and that’s how he talks to the male soldiers.

Jessica and JJ explained that toxic leaders manipulated them through gender discrimination. Jessica shared,

Like I was saying, I was accused of using my femininity to get my way. It was like I didn’t work for anything, almost like my achievements and accomplishments were handed to me. It was highly frustrating. Not that it mattered, but the rumor was that he was saying I flirted with everyone but him.

Overall, participants perceived that the primary goal of toxic leaders was to enforce blind obedience, even if it meant treating subordinates as objects. George described this as a ‘do as I say’ mentality among some of his NCOs. This approach often involved demoralizing subordinates to manipulate them.

***Superordinate Theme 4: Experiences with Toxic Leadership in the Military Have Lasting Impacts on an Individual***

All 10 participants shared insights that contributed to developing the fourth superordinate theme. In the participants' experiences, toxic leadership has long-term effects on soldiers' physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The emergent themes under this superordinate theme were: (a) experienced stress and anxiety, (b) poor relationships, (c) job dissatisfaction, (d) physical impacts, and (e) avoided behaviors considered toxic.

**Emergent Theme 1: Experienced Stress and Anxiety.** Nine out of 10 participants shared that they experienced some level of stress and anxiety due to toxic leadership. Stress and anxiety were characterized by long-term trauma, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt. Six out of the nine participants who contributed to this theme reported lasting emotional trauma. These six participants stated that toxic leadership's effects still persist in their lives. Owen shared,

I don't fully understand how, but I still have constant nightmares about the incident where Sid shot himself. The scarier thing is that I get flustered and sweatie, almost to the point of panic attacks, when I think of that commander's action and that he is still serving as a senior leader in the Army.

Fred shared that the emotional impacts of toxic leadership were long-lasting: "Overall, it left lasting scars that I'm still working through, and I'm not sure I will be fully healed even after leaving the military." Fred added that he had suicidal ideations because of his experiences with toxic leadership. Fred revealed, "I've had some dark moments, not combat or tough military training. I've had some leaders who made me feel like I wanted to kill myself several times over." JJ described his lasting emotional response to the experience of toxic leadership:

Psychologically, I was conflicted every step of the way. I am gay, for crying out loud. I spent much of my life deciding whether I am gay or straight. It was the same as dealing with a toxic, homophobic leader, deciding whether to exercise resilience or file a complaint that would disrupt the team's dynamic. The quest for acceptance, respect, and equality was constant. On one hand, I experienced anger, isolation, and defiance, and sometimes I didn't. It stirred a cocktail of emotions that will linger far beyond my service years.

JT was undergoing therapy, both physical and for PTSD, as a result of his experiences with toxic leadership. JT shared, "Psychologically, during my Med Board, I was told that I suffer from PTSD. I still remember the incident vividly, even 5 years after it happened."

CSM, JJ, and Sarah shared that they were drained or emotionally exhausted after their experiences with toxic leadership. CSM stated, "I can tell you that "[obscene]" was physically and psychologically draining." Sarah shared, "It was so draining dealing with him. I consider myself resilient, but he always found a way to wear you down." Sarah reasoned that interacting with a toxic leader heightened her emotions, which drained her later in life. JJ felt burnt out in the environment with the toxic leader. JJ shared, "I could see how people can become burnt out from working in an environment like the one I did."

**Emergent Theme 2: Poor Relationships.** Five participants shared that their toxic leadership experiences have negatively impacted their interpersonal relationships. Jessica and Tex shared that they have become withdrawn. Jessica stated, "From a socio-emotional perspective, I've become withdrawn from my peers." On the contrary, Fred was avoided by his family and friends because of his mood. Fred shared, "I don't know how to measure it, but my family also suffered. My wife and child avoided me because I was often grumpy or on edge." AJ



and CSM shared that a barrier was created between them, their toxic leader, and their subordinates. CSM stated, “As for me and the major, it created a barrier between us. I lost respect for him.”

**Emergent Theme 3: Job Dissatisfaction.** Four participants felt dissatisfaction in their jobs after experiencing toxic leadership. The participants shared that they dreaded going to work, knowing they would face their counterproductive leaders. Tex stated, “Psychologically, I dread going to work because I had to work for this dude.” George also expressed, “It affected me significantly; imagine having to work for my NCOs. At one point, I dread coming to work.” Jessica dreaded going to work and interacting with her toxic leader with the assumption that their interaction would be nothing but stressful. Jessica stated, “I would dread interacting with the Command Sergeant Major because I knew there was a strong likelihood of being stressed out by him.” JT shared that some soldiers did not want to go to work because they feared their toxic leader. JT stated, “Soldiers who are afraid to come to work because of their toxic leaders can face significant challenges in their military careers and personal well-being.”

**Emergent Theme 4: Physical Impacts of Stress and Anxiety.** The long-term adverse impacts of toxic leadership included physical manifestations of stress and anxiety, as experienced by four participants. AJ, Fred, and George shared that their sleep was affected by the stress and anxiety from their experiences with toxic leadership. George started having “sleepless nights” along with “anxiety, fear, and anger” when he recalled his leader’s toxicity. Fred additionally stated that he started getting migraines: “Physically, I experienced severe stress and anxiety that affected my sleep and caused excruciating migraines.” Jessica expressed how a female comrade opened up about her stress from their toxic leader and how the stress resulted in elevated levels of cortisol. Jessica also attributed her high blood pressure to stressful experiences. Jessica stated,

“Stress was the biggest factor for me, undue stress specifically. All the while, I was suffering from stress ailments like high blood pressure.”

**Emergent Theme 5: Avoided Behaviors Considered Toxic.** The long-term impacts of experiences with toxic leadership were not necessarily limited to tangible outcomes. Three participants shared that their experiences with toxic leadership changed their mindset and practices of how they viewed their own leadership. Owen stated,

I hate to say it, but I learned more from that one man than anyone else in the military, and it wasn't what to do. It was what not to do. I find myself aggressively, not physically aggressive, but in a manner where I confront any instances of toxicity. I never want to see another person undergo what I went through. I firmly oppose any form of counterproductive leadership that prevents soldiers' ability to achieve success and be happy at their place of work without fear of another person making their lives miserable.

JT also shared about learning what to do by knowing what not to do to avoid becoming a toxic leader. JT shared, “If so, I'd say I became the type of leader I wanted to be led by. I cared, stood up for my guys, and treated them respectfully.” CSM had experiences with toxic leadership, especially from a decade ago when mental health advocacy in the military was not as prevalent as in recent years. The CSM said he tried not to act like his toxic leader when he became a senior leader. He realized he did not want to be like the poisonous leaders he served under. CSM received counseling and retraining to be a “competent” leader. CSM shared, “I had to unlearn, adapt, and embrace a leadership style that fosters trust and collaboration; it can be done. I did it.”

*Superordinate Theme 5: Experiences With Toxic Leadership Have Adverse Effects on Team Dynamics*

The final superordinate theme emerged from the data collected from eight participants across 14 occurrences. The emergent theme supporting this superordinate theme was that toxic leadership shattered the team's trust and morale. Thus, team cohesion tended to be affected.

**Emergent Theme 1: Shattered Trust and Morale.** Eight participants shared that the adverse effects of toxic leadership included their difficulty in trusting people of authority as well as their teammates and that they had low team spirit. CSM stated, "It erodes trust and unity." Being in the military entailed engaging in risky missions in which the safety of the personnel depended highly on the team. The participants explained that when leaders are toxic, soldiers doubt them, which could affect the mission's success and the subordinates' well-being. Jessica elucidated,

I'd say the biggest way toxic leadership affects morale in the military is how it affects trust among soldiers. Almost everything the military does involves risks, jumping out of planes, shooting deadly weapons, and handling explosives. If I don't trust my leaders to look out for my well-being, I won't trust them in these risky situations. A lack of trust often leads to an erosion of camaraderie and cohesion.

Team members become divided under toxic leadership. JJ stated, "Toxic leadership is the biggest disruptor of unit cohesion and morale. I experienced firsthand how it erodes trust, fosters division, and causes stress and anxiety among subordinates." Fred and JT explained that each member becomes engaged in protecting their interests against toxic leaders, which can compromise the team's mission. Fred stated that toxic leadership "can also create a toxic environment where soldiers focus on self-preservation rather than mission success." When

soldiers have seen how toxic leadership leads to a comrade being hurt or killed, they lose their trust in their leader and start doing things on their own. AJ shared,

Like the convoy incident, soldiers lose trust in their leaders. Soldiers need to trust their leaders implicitly; toxic leadership undermines that foundation—especially if leaders put soldiers' lives at risk. This decision to conduct the convoy may not represent leadership toxicity; however, the leader's traits are equally damaging as the behavior.

Owen perceived that the impacts of toxic leadership on the trust and morale of the soldiers could carry over to the other leaders. Owen shared that experiences with toxic leadership can lead soldiers to doubt the intentions of other leaders, making them skeptical and causing them to harbor preconceived beliefs that these leaders might also be toxic. Owen stated, 'I believe that not holding toxic leaders accountable negatively impacts the soldiers who suffer under their leadership.'

## **Research Question Responses**

### ***RQ1 Responses***

RQ1 was, "What are the experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members?" All the participants experienced toxic leadership in the context of military culture. The participants perceived the military culture to be different from the civilian culture, as military personnel must strictly adhere to a defined structure and hierarchy. The participants cited their experiences in conforming and almost mindlessly obeying their superiors as dictated by the chain-of-command communication structure in the military. Due to the strict structure and hierarchy, toxic leaders and their abusive behaviors tended to go unchecked. Additionally, the participants reported that military culture also involves a harsh discipline

system in which punishment is standard. According to the participants, toxic leaders leverage the strict discipline system to exploit lower-ranked soldiers.

In terms of the characteristics of toxic leaders, all 10 participants perceived that toxic leaders are self-centered, while nine participants believed that toxic leaders are manipulative. Based on the participants' words, self-centeredness involved the leaders' egotism. Egotistical, toxic leaders lacked empathy and consideration for their subordinates' well-being. Self-centered toxic leaders are also dismissive of feedback from others. Manipulative leaders were reported to use their authority as leverage when abusing or threatening their subordinates. One such experience, as shared by two participants, was hazing. Another participant shared that their leader threatened them with their performance evaluation. Seven participants emphasized that while they experienced toxic leadership in the military, they also interacted with leaders they looked up to and who served as their mentors.

### ***RQ2 Responses***

RQ2 was, "What are the perceived adverse outcomes derived among recently retired U.S. Army service members and their experiences with toxic leadership?" The experience of toxic leadership has enduring effects on all 10 participants. Nine of the 10 participants experienced stress and anxiety, which included lasting trauma, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt. Five participants shared that their relationships with their families, friends, and comrades were negatively affected because of their stress and anxiety. Four participants dreaded going to work and were dissatisfied with their jobs. Four other participants had physical manifestations of stress, such as migraines and inability to sleep. However, not all outcomes of toxic leadership were adverse. Three participants shared that because of their experiences with toxic leadership,

they knew what not to do as leaders and understood the need to emphasize communication and empathy when interacting with their subordinates.

Eight participants stated that toxic leaders caused them and their comrades to become skeptical of their leader's intentions and actions, resulting in low morale. The participants explained that their experiences with toxic leadership made them want to engage in self-preservation instead of protecting the team's interests. Thus, the team dynamics suffered because of toxic leadership.

### **Summary**

This chapter contained the presentation of the findings. Ten retired U.S. Army service members shared their experiences with toxic military leadership and its adverse outcomes. The participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured format. The transcripts were analyzed using IPA with additional theme validation techniques. The iterative analysis was primarily inductive, with guidance from the toxic triangle framework. In the data analysis, the resulting emergent themes involved concepts from the framework, such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Some emergent themes included descriptions of self-centered and manipulative leaders, which were parts of the toxic triangle. Five superordinate themes were developed from the emergent themes.

The participants perceived that the military culture contributed to and enabled toxic leadership. The need to conform to the strict structure and hierarchy in the military allowed persons of authority to use their positions to take advantage of subordinates. Self-centered leaders tend to lack consideration for others. Their main focus was their personal gains and agendas, which compromised their subordinates' well-being. Manipulative leaders abused their authority to exploit their subordinates. Toxic leadership experiences can have long-term physical,

mental, and emotional impacts on subordinates. The participants endured lasting stress and anxiety, job dissatisfaction, and poor interpersonal relationships. They also became distrustful of persons of authority and their team members as they focused on self-preservation over team spirit. The results of this study will be analyzed further using the toxic triangle framework in the subsequent chapter. Chapter Five will also present the study's conclusions.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **Overview**

In this interpretive phenomenological study, I investigated the experiential effects of toxic leadership on recently retired U.S. Army service members, uncovering associated adverse outcomes through comprehensive semi-structured interviews. The phenomenological research approach allowed me to explore how the participants related to the studied phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of individuals. In my study, 10 U.S. Army veterans who had retired within the last 4 years shared their experiences with toxic leadership in the U.S. Army.

For this research, I defined toxic leadership as a type of leadership in which leaders' behaviors inflict physical or psychological harm on their subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). The theory guiding my study was Paulhus and Williams's (2002) toxic triangle, known as the "dark triad." This final chapter presents a summary of the findings from Chapter Four, a discussion of the findings, the implications in light of relevant literature, and a section that addresses the methodological and practical implications of the findings. The chapter further outlines the study's delimitations and limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings presented in this chapter contribute to the body of knowledge on detecting and preventing toxic leadership in the military. I investigated the experiences of recently retired U.S. Army service members, who provided detailed accounts of their encounters with toxic leadership and the resulting adverse outcomes through comprehensive, semi-structured



interviews. In the following sections, I will address the responses to the two research questions underpinning my study.

### **RQ1 Responses**

The first research question was, “What are the experiences of toxic leadership among recently retired U.S. Army service members?” All 10 participants in my study reported experiencing toxic leadership while in the military and following the dictates of their superiors without question. One key factor they raised was that military culture is structured according to a strict hierarchy that must be respected. The harsh disciplinarian culture enables toxic behavior by leaders, and these leaders are seldom reprimanded or prevented from acting abusively. The participants further reported that harsh punishment is normalized within military structures. This normalization gave toxic leaders the license to exploit vulnerable soldiers who are of lower ranks with threats of punishment like poor evaluation reports, extra duty, and forfeiture of pay.

The participants consistently observed that toxic leaders displayed egotism, resulting in self-centered behavior. Nine participants perceived these leaders as manipulative, using their position of authority to intimidate subordinates. Due to their egotism, the toxic leaders had little empathy and consideration for their subordinates’ well-being and dismissed feedback from others. Two participants mentioned that manipulative leaders abuse their authority by engaging in abusive behavior, such as hazing and threatening negative performance evaluations, to keep their subordinates in check. Seven participants, however, reported that they had leaders who acted as mentors and were exceptional figures they looked up to while in the military.

### **RQ2 Responses**

The second research question was, “What are the perceived adverse outcomes derived among recently retired U.S. Army service members and their experiences with toxic leadership?”

Toxic leadership leaves an indelible mark on its victims, including the participants in my study, who felt the enduring effects of stress and anxiety from negative military experiences. Seven participants also reported having exceptional mentors who provided inspiration amidst the challenges. Among the adverse outcomes of the experience were feelings of self-doubt and emotional exhaustion, which also manifested as suicidal ideation.

Half the participants mentioned how enduring stress impacted their family and professional relationships and friendships while serving. Reflecting on their military service, four participants said they experienced job dissatisfaction and a sense of dread about going to work. Physical manifestations of the stress caused by toxic leaders, such as insomnia and migraines, plagued some participants. Overall, the effects of toxic leadership persisted long after the participants left the military, even though some reported positive outcomes from their negative experiences.

Three participants who had ascended to leadership roles reported being more mindful of their actions due to their previous experiences with toxic leadership. They also noted that their interactions with subordinates were communicative and empathic. However, some participants expressed skepticism about their ability to positively influence their team when confronted with toxic leaders. In these cases, their main aim shifted towards self-protection rather than looking out for their team. This mindset led to poor morale and had a lasting impact on team dynamics due to previous experiences with toxic leadership.

### **Discussion**

Scholars have not provided a unified definition of toxic leadership (Hinen, 2019; Milosevic et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018). However, relevant to this study, Hinen (2019) argued

that an organization's level of discipline often determines the degree of toxicity a leader exhibits. Therefore, the hierarchical structures and strict discipline of the military would seem to facilitate the emergence of toxic leadership. Previous literature has defined toxic leadership as the presence of dysfunctional behaviors to manipulate, intimidate, coerce, and inflict disciplinary tactics for the leader's benefit. Toxic leaders often mistreat their subordinates, neglecting their needs and contributions. This behavior can lead to a lack of support, unreasonable demands, and a demoralized team, ultimately hindering its performance (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Milosevic et al., 2020).

Another defining factor of toxic leadership mentioned in the literature is its potential effects on employees (Monico et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2021). The literature notes that leaders who exhibit toxicity through their actions are often counterproductive and thrive in an environment with vulnerable individuals (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Hinen, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that the characteristics of the military environment are conducive to toxic leadership, according to the opinions of the participants interviewed.

The participants' descriptions of their military leaders align with Paulhus and Williams's (2002) 'dark triad' of toxic traits, which includes narcissism, characterized by egotism and lack of empathy; Machiavellianism, marked by manipulation and self-centeredness; and psychopathy, which involves antisocial and unemotional behavior. These traits conflict with ethical qualities like humility and honesty. The emergent themes highlight self-centered and manipulative leadership behaviors, reflecting characteristics of the dark triad.

### **The Structure and Hierarchy of the Military Culture**

Participants described the military culture as highly structured and hierarchical, emphasizing strict adherence to the chain of command and obedience to superiors. This

environment, they observed, fosters toxic leadership. Soldiers are expected to comply with orders without question, creating an ideal breeding ground for leadership toxicity when the requirement for blind compliance goes unchecked. This emphasis on hierarchy, conformity, and unquestioning obedience inadvertently creates a high-stress environment that stifles voices and concerns, fostering the development of toxic leaders. Previous research indicates that toxic leaders are more successful in environments with a questionable chain of command and vulnerable subordinates (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Hinen, 2019).

Participants observed that the military's emphasis on strong team cohesion and strict hierarchy discourages the reporting of toxic leaders, as reporting could harm team unity and result in retaliation. This environment, where obedience and order are prioritized over empathy and respect, allows toxic leadership to thrive due to a lack of accountability for leaders' abusive actions. Participants pointed out that toxic behavior in the military has insufficient consequences. Often, the only action taken is transferring the offender to another unit, which differs from the accountability seen in civilian settings. Participants perceived that the blurred line between discipline and toxicity in the military exacerbates the problem. Lower-ranking soldiers are more likely to face harsh punishment for infractions, while senior leaders only receive a slap on the wrist.

The dark triad framework highlights the convergence of destructive leadership traits, which the military's structure may foster. The study also examines transactional leadership, which is acknowledged for its managerial characteristics and association with toxic characteristics. The military's authoritarian leadership style shares similarities with transactional leadership, as it focuses on hierarchy, strict rules, organization, supervision, and compliance.

Participants noted that the military's structure and bureaucracy deterred soldiers from reporting toxic leaders, who cited lengthy and complex processes as significant barriers. Military personnel's contractual commitments prevent soldiers from simply resigning, leading them to endure toxic work environments. One female participant shared that she never reported her major despite knowing the available rules and processes. She claimed she felt capable of standing up for herself but was also aware of the time-consuming nature of formal investigations.

Previous research has identified common characteristics of leaders, noting that personality traits significantly impact a leader's success or failure (Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020; Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019). Transformational and transactional leadership are recognized styles, with transactional leadership more associated with toxic traits (Carleton et al., 2018; Daniels et al., 2019; Hesbol, 2019). This study found that leaders could enforce silence around abuses through the threat of punishment.

Leadership research emphasizes the importance of creating healthy, productive cultures (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Bowers, 2019; Engler & Whitesides, 2022; Gemeda & Lee, 2020; Men & Stacks, 2013; Mostowlansky et al., 2020). However, this study highlights how toxic leadership thrives in the military culture, trapping subordinates in situations where they are hesitant to report behavior for fear of repercussions.

Transactional leadership, acknowledged for its managerial qualities, emphasizes strict rules and an organized workflow, two characteristics often observed in military culture (Gemeda & Lee, 2020; Ma & Jiang, 2018; Steinmann et al., 2018; Young et al., 2021). However, this rigidity can lead to a toxic environment if it results in a lack of recognition of unhealthy communication or favoritism (Anjum et al., 2018; Rasool et al., 2021). The military's structures and hierarchies can prevent reporting toxic behavior and enable inflexible attitudes in superiors

(Dobbs & Do, 2019; Fosse et al., 2019). The authoritarian leadership in the military allows toxic leaders to disregard input and escape accountability.

Some participants spoke of positive mentorship experiences with leaders who changed their leadership style to avoid inflicting pain, while they viewed toxic leaders as negative role models (Burke & Barron, 2015; Crews et al., 2019; Dobbs & Do, 2019). Toxic leadership negatively impacts employee well-being and organizational functioning (Asim et al., 2021; Q. Chen et al., 2019; Karabati et al., 2019; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). However, as noted by seven participants, empowering leadership can positively impact soldiers' well-being, as it emphasizes the importance of fostering autonomy, participation, and decision-making among military personnel (Hannah et al., 2009; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007).

These seven participants emphasized that, despite their experiences with toxic leadership in the military, they also had meaningful interactions with leaders whom they admired and who served as their mentors. This approach reflects positive leadership principles, which prioritize the development of strengths, the enhancement of well-being, and the creation of a supportive environment (Cameron, 2012; Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014). In the military, empowering leadership can increase morale, improve team performance, and enhance adaptability to challenging situations (Walumbwa et al., 2010).

### **Leadership Style and Self-Centered Behavior**

Research has shown that authoritarian leadership styles, characterized by limited employee input and rigid environments, lead to toxic behavior (Karabati et al., 2019; Pizzolitto et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Participants in this study described toxic leaders as self-centered, insensitive, and exploitative individuals who prioritize personal gain over team well-being. They

experienced leaders' lack of regard for subordinates' well-being, with some leaders willing to risk lives to achieve their goals.

As described by Paulhus and Williams (2002), the traits of destructive leaders include charisma, personalized power, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate. This characterization aligns with participants' perceptions of self-centered and egotistical leaders. Toxic leadership was seen as abusing the leadership position for selfish gain, with participants reporting exclusion from the team by egotistical leaders.

Brandebo and Alvinus (2019) and Green (2020) found that military leaders with great responsibility often had inflated egos. Gemeda and Lee (2020) noted that the task-focused transactional leadership style was successful but could lead to reduced job satisfaction. Transactional leaders, according to Coldwell (2021), Pelletier et al. (2019), and Saleem et al. (2021), organize things as they see fit and disregard subordinates, aligning with participants' reports of self-centered behavior in Army leaders.

Wang et al. (2019) described authoritarian leaders as dictatorial, discouraging creativity and innovative ideas. Employees under authoritarian leaders recognize leaders' lack of trust in their subordinates' decision-making (Karabati et al., 2019; Pizzolitto et al., 2022). The lack of trust and abuse of authority leads to toxic leadership (Du et al., 2020; Kiahn Acuna & Male, 2022; Zaman et al., 2022), as evident in participants' descriptions of their need for trust and support from leaders. Authoritarian leaders are often bossy and controlling, taking credit for profits and productivity (Asim et al., 2021; Du et al., 2020; Pizzolitto et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019), as seen in one participant's experience who described "being held back" by NCOs.

Leaders who abuse their roles create toxic work environments, causing employee resentment (Iqabal et al., 2021; Zhang & Xie, 2017). Participants' negative memories of their

work environments and lack of motivation to speak out relate to the findings of Du et al. (2020) that entire departments suffer when denied input on procedures, and employees are left feeling unappreciated.

### **Leaders Exhibit Oppressive Misuse of Authority**

Participants perceived oppressive misuse of authority as manipulative and toxic leadership, with nine out of 10 reporting experiences of such abuse. They noted that these leaders violated the Army's core values of loyalty, duty, respect, service, honor, and personal courage, instead resorting to manipulation, intimidation, and lack of accountability.

Participants' experiences included threats to job security within performance evaluations, discriminatory comments, and favoritism, creating an environment of fear and exclusion. Some leaders verbally and physically abused subordinates belittled them by assigning them petty tasks, made passive-aggressive remarks, and exhibited gender discrimination. Participants perceived that the objective of toxic leaders was to enforce mindless compliance, as they often resorted to demoralizing tactics to manipulate their subordinates.

### **Leadership Style and Manipulative Behavior**

Research has shown that toxic leaders often exhibit narcissistic traits, including pridefulness, egotism, lack of empathy, and grandiosity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tiwari & Jha, 2022). Participants also stated that they encountered leaders who demanded blind obedience and were intolerant of dissent, even on matters of gender discrimination and abusive language, due to their sense of entitlement (Baloyi, 2020). Machiavellian characteristics such as manipulation, deceit, callousness, and cynicism are also prevalent in toxic leaders (Triantoro et al., 2020). Participants described experiences with leaders who used abusive language,



manipulated performance evaluations, and showed a disregard for the emotional impact of their decisions; these accounts align with Fahie's (2020) description of toxic leadership behaviors.

Transactional leadership, which relies on rewards and punishments to enforce compliance, has been identified as a style that toxic leaders might adopt (Kondratyev, 2019; Steinmann et al., 2018). Participants reported instances where leaders used performance evaluations and threats of abuse, such as hazing, to manipulate subordinates, a behavior consistent with transactional leadership (Coldwell, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). Dobbs and Do (2019) and Hinen (2019, 2020) have outlined defining characteristics of toxic leadership, including frequent negative feedback, discrimination based on gender or race, an emphasis on hierarchy that hinders promotion, and self-interest coupled with an inflated ego (Baloyi, 2020; Milosevic et al., 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Wolor et al., 2022). These traits were reflected in the experiences shared by participants, highlighting the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on military personnel.

### **Lasting Effects of Toxic Leadership in the Military**

According to Barnett (2018) and Gameda and Lee (2020), transactional leadership can negatively predict job satisfaction. This finding is supported by participants' experiences, which illustrate the long-term adverse effects of toxic leadership on their well-being. Nine participants reported stress and anxiety, while six described lasting trauma, experiences that are consistent with traits associated with Machiavellian leadership (Triantoro et al., 2020). Participants reported long-term physical and emotional scars from toxic leadership, including stress, anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, discrimination, and PTSD, supporting the idea that toxic leadership is psychologically harmful (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Kiritu, 2018). Interpersonal relationships suffered, leading to divisions and a loss of respect within teams. Some individuals

became more withdrawn at work and alienated from family and friends due to their emotional state.

This analysis indicates a correlation between transactional and toxic leadership, as both styles involve manipulation. Transactional leadership, characterized by its use of rewards and punishments, lends itself to manipulation, as reported by participants (Coldwell, 2021; Kondratyev, 2019; Pelletier et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021; Steinmann et al., 2018). Manipulation is a common thread that connects transactional leadership to toxic leadership, which is marked by traits such as negative feedback, discrimination, hierarchical emphasis, and self-interest (Baloyi, 2020; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Hinen, 2019, 2020; Milosevic et al., 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Wolor et al., 2022). The overlap suggests that the transactional approach focuses on control and compliance, which can foster an environment conducive to toxic leadership behaviors.

Toxic leadership has been shown to impact job satisfaction and retention negatively. This adverse impact was evidenced by participants' reported feelings of dread toward work due to fear and discomfort (Baloyi, 2020; Barnett, 2018; Gameda & Lee, 2020; Iqabal et al., 2021; Sirin et al., 2018; Zhang & Xie, 2017). Burns (2017) further noted that toxic leadership can lead to decreases in psychological, socioemotional, and physical well-being. This finding suggests that toxic leadership's effects are detrimental to individuals' work experiences and have broader implications for their overall health and wellness. Participants' experiences align with research findings that indicate worsened job performance, motivation, and engagement in environments with toxic leadership. These experiences frequently result in low job satisfaction and increased turnover rates among workers (Bakkal et al., 2019; Baloyi, 2020; Kalidass & Bahron, 2015;

Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Khan et al., 2016; Iqbal et al., 2021; Rayton & Yalabik, 2014; Singh et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Wolor et al., 2022; Zhang & Xie, 2017).

### **Toxic Leadership and Suicide in the Army**

According to research, toxic leadership within military environments can contribute to suicidal behavior (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Beum, 2020; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Hester, 2017; Matsuda, 2014; Nock et al., 2017; Suitt, 2021; Trachik et al., 2021; Wilson, 2014). Participants interviewed in this study revealed that leaders who were perceived to be toxic had dismissive attitudes toward suicidal ideation, indicating that toxic leadership contributes to an environment where mental health concerns, including thoughts of suicide, are not taken seriously. This dismissiveness, coupled with the pressures and stressors associated with toxic leadership behaviors, can contribute to the development or worsening of suicidal ideation among military personnel (Babos & Rusu, 2020).

Beum (2020), Matsuda (2014), Dobbs and Do (2019), Trachik et al. (2021), Nock et al. (2017), Hester (2017), and Suitt (2021) claimed that Army suicides were not only due to factors such as debt, mental health issues, trouble in childhood, or substance abuse problems; instead, a large portion were related to toxic leadership. The participants in this study highlighted dismissive attitudes toward suicidal ideation, underscoring how toxic leadership in challenging military environments can exacerbate pressures, leading soldiers to a breaking point, as documented by Matsuda (2014) and Wilson (2014).

Matsuda (2014) interviewed a cohort of soldiers who had a fellow service member commit suicide. The findings showed that while most suicide victims were suffering from problems in their personal lives, all of the victims had toxic leaders. When reporting his findings to the Army, Matsuda (2014) claimed that a toxic command climate could trigger the tendency

for suicidal behavior. Matsuda's (2014) research is supported by the personal experiences of suicidal ideation, stress, fear, and anxiety that the participants in this study have related.

### **Toxic Leadership and Team Dynamics**

Toxic leaders who are narcissistic and manipulative exhibit traits that are destructive in the workplace (Pelletier, 2010). Narcissistic, controlling, and authoritative leadership styles, where leaders abuse their roles, lead to employee resentment and toxic work environments (Iqbal et al., 2021; Zhang & Xie, 2017). Research by Milosevic et al. (2020) found that toxic behaviors from leaders resulted in a hostile climate, dissatisfied employees, poor internal structures, and high attrition rates.

Eight participants reported that toxic leadership led them to have difficulty trusting authority figures and teammates, which can lead to a decline in team cohesion. Being in the military involves engaging in risky missions where soldiers' safety largely depends on the team. Participants explained that when leaders are toxic, soldiers doubt them, which could affect the mission's success and subordinates' safety. This erosion of trust was highlighted as the most significant consequence of toxic leadership. In activities that involve risk, trust is crucial. If leaders cannot elicit trust, they cannot be trusted to look out for their subordinates in dangerous situations. A lack of trust often leads to an erosion of camaraderie and cohesion.

Under toxic leadership, team members become divided. In addition to eroded trust, participants shared that toxic leadership fosters division among subordinates. Instead of focusing on the mission, each subordinate focuses on shielding themselves from the negative impact of the toxic leader. Self-preservation takes precedence over cohesion and mission success. When soldiers perceive that they are under counterproductive leaders, they may lose trust in their leaders and begin to act independently. Toxic leadership undermines the foundation of implicit

trust, which is crucial in life-threatening situations. If leaders do not allow subordinates to contribute to decision-making, their self-centered leadership could put soldiers' lives at risk. One participant noted that subordinates' lack of trust in their toxic leader led to low morale and significantly influenced their perceptions of other leaders within their formation. When leaders are seen as above the law and not held accountable, they are not trusted, eliciting skepticism about the behavior of all leaders.

Researchers have found that transactional leadership, often toxic, can be detrimental to employees (Baloyi, 2020; Sirin et al., 2018). Transactional leadership within an unhealthy environment significantly influences overall job satisfaction (Barnett, 2018; Gameda & Lee, 2020). Adverse consequences of transactional include low employee morale, high turnover rates, decreased productivity, increased hiring and training costs, and damage to an organization's reputation (Fosse et al., 2019; Ortega, 2019). In hierarchical structures where subordinates are afraid to speak out, as noted by the participants in this study, subordinates lack recourse to address negative behaviors (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Fosse et al., 2019). This research adds to existing studies by examining the military hierarchy and structure, providing perspectives on how participants cope with toxic work conditions within the military culture.

In the military, a dysfunctional leader can achieve short-term objectives by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers comply with instructions due to the power of the leader's position (Matsuda, 2014). While there may be short-term results, the results soon become negative if the leader lacks other competencies. When a toxic leader uses negative influence intermittently, it undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale (Wilson, 2014). This dynamic also affects the legitimacy of the Army's evaluative process, with soldiers unable to anonymously evaluate their superiors. As noted by the

participants in this study, the failure to hold toxic leaders accountable within the Army's structure can adversely impact individual soldier well-being and team morale.

The study aimed to address the gap in research regarding detailed examinations of toxic leadership and its adverse effects on retired Army service members, as such investigations were not frequently conducted or unavailable in existing literature (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Discussing soldiers' experiences with toxic leadership helps fill this literature gap. By unpacking the details of toxic leadership's personal and professional impact on military personnel, this study has addressed some of the questions about toxic leadership in previous research.

### **Implications**

This section discusses the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members. The conceptual framework for the study was the dark triad theory by Paulhus and Williams (2002), which focuses on the experiences of toxic leadership and describes its impact on employees. This theory is based on three domains: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which are influential characteristics of a toxic leader.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

Despite numerous studies on detecting and addressing toxic leadership, its prevalence remains high in the military, with limited research on the personal experiences of Army service members (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). This study expands the research by focusing on employees' experiences in toxic work environments. Earlier literature primarily addressed the effects of toxic leadership on workplace culture and the interaction

between supervisors and employees (Euwema et al., 2007; Kawamoto et al., 2016). By concentrating on the experiences of U.S. Army members subjected to toxic leadership, this study broadens the scope of existing research.

Research on toxic leadership in the military is limited, with most studies focusing on public and private sector organizations (Brandebo et al., 2019; Kayani & Alasan, 2021). This study adds to the literature by examining the personal experiences of military personnel, their emotional well-being, and team cohesion under toxic leadership. Previous research has indicated that military leaders with great responsibility often suffer from an inflated ego and harbor secret vulnerabilities (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019; Green, 2020). The study confirms these findings, with participants perceiving their leaders as self-centered and egotistical, sometimes to the detriment of the mission.

The U.S. Army has comprehensive guidelines to prevent toxic leadership, but research directly exploring this issue is lacking (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017, 2019). This study contributes to understanding the impact of toxic leadership in a branch of the U.S. military that has already taken measures to address the problem. Quantitative research has found unhealthy outcomes from toxic leadership, but there is a significant gap in research examining the personal experiences of those subjected to such leadership (Burns, 2017; Williard, 2017). This study's qualitative approach provides a nuanced examination of the personal experiences of subordinates under toxic military leadership.

Focusing on the specific population of recently retired U.S. Army personnel is crucial, as prevention and protection measures within the military are often overlooked in evaluations of toxic leadership (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Brandebo et al., 2019; Horval, 2020; Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Molino et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). This study's findings may contribute to

preventing toxic leadership in the military community by providing an understanding of the importance of proactive methods to dissuade toxic behaviors. By shedding light on vulnerable populations' unique challenges, this research can inform targeted interventions and policies addressing toxic leadership's root causes. Furthermore, it highlights the need for continuous education and training within the military to foster leadership styles that promote well-being and effective team dynamics.

### **Empirical Implications**

There is a need for further research to examine the personal experiences of military personnel under toxic leadership (Brandebo & Alvinius, 2019; Green, 2020). Future studies could focus on exploring the emotional well-being and team cohesion of soldiers who have been exposed to toxic leaders. Quantitative data could be collected on the prevalence of toxic leadership within the military and its impact on military members' mental health (Fosse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020).

Additionally, there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of current prevention and intervention measures to address toxic leadership in the military (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017, 2019). Research could also explore the potential of transformational and authentic leadership styles in mitigating the harmful effects of toxic leadership (I. Khan & Nawaz, 2016; Northouse, 2018). Specifically, studies could examine how these positive leadership styles promote healthy relationships and shared goals within military units and how they can be integrated into military training and leadership development programs to foster a more supportive and healthy organizational culture (Barnett, 2018; Matsuda, 2014).



### **Practical Implications**

Toxic leadership in the military is characterized by self-serving behaviors disregarding subordinates' well-being, impacting their emotions, work performance, and team cohesion (Coldwell, 2021; Steinmann et al., 2018). Despite the hierarchical and restrictive culture of the U.S. military, toxic leaders often remain unchecked due to their positions of power and the delivery of short-term results (Anjum et al., 2018; Coldwell, 2021; Winn & Dykes, 2019). The Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 highlights that such leadership adversely affects the organization and mission performance (U.S. Department of the Army, 2019).

As outlined in Army Regulation 600-100, targeted interventions are necessary to address and rectify toxic leadership behaviors (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017). These interventions should focus on promoting self-awareness and early training for Army leaders to prevent destructive leadership styles (Horval, 2020; Saleem et al., 2021). However, the challenge lies in ensuring that toxic leaders recognize their harmful behaviors, as they often operate under high pressure and may not acknowledge their toxic traits (Coldwell, 2021).

Previous literature suggests that transformational leadership fosters positive relationships and shared goals and is less likely to enable harmful behaviors than transactional and authoritarian leadership (Burns, 2017; I. Khan & Nawaz, 2016; Northouse, 2018). Programs fostering positive relationships between superiors and subordinates could reduce the acceptance of toxic leadership as a norm in military training (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Matsuda, 2014). Authentic leadership, which emphasizes self-awareness, honesty, and transparency, should be promoted to create healthier work environments and improve organizational outcomes (Alilyyani et al., 2018; Lee & Kuo, 2019; Malik et al., 2018). The challenge for future practice is to shift toward more communicative leadership that considers subordinates' interests in decision-

making. Transformational leaders who demonstrate individualized consideration and act as role models can inspire their subordinates and foster a sense of shared leadership, moving beyond the traditional authoritarian military culture (Barnett, 2018).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study focused on 10 retired U.S. Army service members who experienced toxic leadership within the last 5 years and retired within the past 4 years. This specific population was chosen to ensure recent and relevant experiences with toxic leadership in the U.S. Army context, where measures to address such behaviors exist (Horval, 2020; Saleem et al., 2021).

Limitations of this study include the participants' demographics, their positions in the Army hierarchy, and the focus on retired members, whose experiences may not fully represent current service members' experiences. The study focused on two key aspects: whether participants acknowledged toxic behaviors and how to help them recognize such behaviors. It also concentrated on subordinates' experiences rather than leaders' perspectives, which could provide valuable insight into recognizing toxic behavior (Coldwell, 2021).

The qualitative nature of this study and the reliance on participants' memories could introduce subjectivity and potential bias. However, measures such as bracketing (Bednall, 2006) and explication (van Manen & van Manen, 2021) were employed to ensure the study's validity and objectivity, as outlined in Chapter Three. These strategies aimed to minimize the researcher's biases and accurately reflect the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Fhan et al., 2013).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This section outlines suggestions for future research based on this study's findings, limitations, and delimitations. It also considers gaps in the existing literature. Future research

should focus on the subjective definitions of toxic leadership and leadership styles, as highlighted by Dess and Picken (2000), Z. Khan et al. (2016), and Pidgeon (2017). Additionally, studies should explore the reasons behind toxic leadership behaviors and their impact on employees, as discussed by Kalidass and Bahron (2015), Rayton and Yalabik (2014), and Smith et al. (2019).

Further investigation is needed to examine leadership styles and explore toxic leadership and its potential causes, as suggested by Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) and Olanrewaju and Okorie (2019). The literature also indicates a need to examine how transactional, transformational, and authentic leadership characteristics affect toxic leadership behaviors (Baloyi, 2020; Daniels et al., 2019; Hesbol, 2019; Pizzolitto et al., 2022; Sirin et al., 2018). This study has raised important questions about the experiences of U.S. Army personnel with toxic leadership, and future research should explore these and other identified avenues.

Previous quantitative studies have not thoroughly investigated the experiences of U.S. Army soldiers affected by toxic leadership throughout their service. It is suggested that a phenomenological study centered on U.S. Army leaders currently in command be conducted, accompanied by a related study that delves into the experiences of their subordinates. This dual study approach would provide a detailed perspective on the impact of toxic leadership, capturing insights from both leaders and their subordinates.

Army leaders play a crucial role in shaping the culture of the military, especially where toxic leadership is prevalent among those with significant responsibility (Brandebo & Alvinus, 2019; Green, 2020). Leaders are challenged to recognize toxic behavior in themselves (Coldwell, 2021), so it is crucial to understand if current U.S. Army leaders are redefining their styles and

attempting behavioral transformation. An in-depth analysis of each leadership style is necessary to understand the impact of each on subordinates (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

A quantitative study could examine various leadership styles across all branches of the U.S. military. This research focused on the U.S. Army, which has begun addressing toxic leadership behaviors (Horval, 2020; Saleem et al., 2021). A quantitative scoping exercise could assess the prevalence of toxic leadership across the military and identify where alternative leadership styles have been successfully implemented. Previous research has measured military personnel's perceptions of toxic leadership within the confines of military service (Fosse et al., 2019; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Additionally, a companion quantitative study could evaluate measures addressing toxic leadership in other military branches and compare them with those in the U.S. Army.

A quantitative study on the attitudes and efficacy of U.S. military top leadership regarding toxic leadership prevalence could offer a unique perspective on how military culture enables toxic behavior. Such research would also inform future studies on strategies to mitigate the issue, as few studies have investigated the protective measures implemented against toxic leadership (Babos & Rusu, 2020; Beum, 2020; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Horval, 2020; Molino et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021; Suitt, 2021; Trachik et al., 2021).

Finally, there is a need to identify methods for preventing and correcting toxic leadership behaviors. Researchers should focus on the most effective strategies, training, and professional development opportunities for U.S. military leaders to transform their behavior and adopt more appropriate leadership styles. Limited studies have discussed the current military measures for preventing toxic leadership and the propensity for its occurrence among military leaders (Brandebo et al., 2019; Kayani & Alasan, 2021; Green, 2020).

### Summary

This interpretive phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences and adverse outcomes of toxic leadership as perceived by recently retired U.S. Army service members. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the research sought to enhance the understanding of the impact of toxic leadership within the military context. A central theme emerged that military culture, characterized by strict hierarchy and obedience, inadvertently fosters an environment conducive to toxic leadership. Participants reported that the chain of command and high-stress environment often suppress subordinates' voices, enabling abusive behavior by toxic leaders.

Another significant finding is the lack of accountability for abusive leaders in the military. Participants observed that toxic individuals could function in the military, whereas they would face repercussions in civilian life. The fear of retaliation and military bureaucracy often deter subordinates from reporting abusive behavior. This study also highlighted that the task-saturated and oriented nature of military culture sometimes overshadows the need for empathy and respect.

The military leaders described by participants exhibited characteristics of the dark triad: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. As Paulhus and Williams (2002) outlined, these leaders lack ethical traits such as humility and honesty. In contrast, authentic leadership, which includes positive traits like fairness and faithfulness, can improve job performance and foster positive leader-employee relationships (Niu et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2020). Avolio (2018) suggested that transformational leaders could drive innovation and change organizational culture.

The findings of this study underscore the need for the U.S. military to transform aspects of its leadership styles to mitigate the impact of toxic leadership. The military can create a more

positive and productive environment by fostering authentic and transformational leadership. This research contributes to understanding toxic leadership in the U.S. Army and provides insights for developing more effective leadership practices.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the harmful issue of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army, as seen by participants, and its detrimental effects on military personnel. The research highlights the urgent need for systemic change within the military hierarchy to address and prevent the pervasive issue of toxic leadership. Implementing strategies that promote authentic and transformational leadership styles can significantly enhance the well-being of service members, improve team cohesion, and ultimately lead to a more effective and resilient military force. As the U.S. Army continues to evolve, leadership development programs must prioritize ethical conduct, empathy, and respect to cultivate a culture of positive leadership that aligns with the military's core values. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on toxic leadership in the military context. It highlights the adverse effects of toxic leadership and offers a roadmap for fostering a healthier, more supportive, and more dynamic leadership environment within the U.S. Army.

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### Appendix A: List of Codes

Code	Quote
blurred line between discipline and abuse	In the early years, the line between discipline and toxicity was blurred.
lack of accountability	The authority and power vested in leaders can sometimes be wielded without accountability, making the subordinates vulnerable, thus amplifying the impact of toxic leadership.
pressured to conform	Additionally, the pressure to maintain unit cohesion sometimes prevents individuals from speaking out against toxic leaders.
egotistic	I think toxic leaders are egotistical, selfish, and power-hungry.
exploitative for personal agenda	In my case, they are controlling, petty, and more focused on achieving their personal objectives.
insensitive	In my experience, the most prominent traits were insensitivity and arrogance.
can have differences but not toxic	Yes, we had personalities and differences in leadership styles, but I wouldn't describe it as toxic.
had a good relationship with leaders	I was fortunate to work for some incredible commanders who were both mentors and friends.
looked up to leaders	I had intelligent, talented, experienced leaders
short leadership terms	In the army, you get a new leader every two to three years; even though you can serve 20-plus years in the military, the relationships are often short-lived and superficial.
abusing authority	I will tell you that the dudes I worked for abused their power.
belittling and using derogatory language	One instance that stands out involves a superior who consistently belittles and undermines his subordinates.
gender discrimination	It was an evident display of his disapproval and lack of respect for my sexual orientation.
passive aggressive comments	I had one NCO who was very passive-aggressive.
changed oneself to foster healthy leadership	I'll admit that I was that guy; the difference is, the instant it came to my attention, I embraced the training and the ideals of healthy leadership.
embraced new mindset	Understanding counterproductive leadership has been a learning curve. I had to unlearn, adapt, and embrace a leadership style that fosters trust and collaboration. It can be done; I did it.
doubted oneself	I am constantly anxious about my performance, always having to self-evaluate if I'm within the expected standards.
drained	It was so draining dealing with him. I consider myself resilient, but he always found a way to wear you down.
feared of retaliation	Reporting toxic leadership can be intimidating, and there's often a fear of retaliation.
feared punishment	I dare not be late or do anything to give them a legitimate reason to smoke (punish) me.
felt powerless	Psychologically, it led to ...a feeling of powerlessness.
have lasting trauma	Overall, it left lasting scars that I'm still working through, and I'm not sure I will be fully healed even after leaving the military.
mental debilitation when comrades are at risk	It can be mentally debilitating knowing that your decisions can cause someone's death or adversely impact their life.

Code	Quote
reached the point of suicidal ideation	However, I've had some dark moments, not combat not tough military training. I've had some leaders who made me feel like I wanted to kill myself several times over
left the military	Soldiers who are afraid to come to work because of their toxic leaders can face significant challenges in their military careers and personal well-being.
elevated cortisol levels	I remember confiding in a female lieutenant who told me that her relationship with her commander caused her to have elevated cortisol levels.
high blood pressure	All the while, I was suffering from stress ailments like high blood pressure.
lack of sleep	Sleepless nights, anxiety, fear, anger...all of that. I f**king hated these dudes, especially SGT Drum-ass (that's what I called him).
migraines	Physically, I experienced severe stress and anxiety that affected my sleep and caused excruciating migraines.
withdrawn	Socio-emotionally, I felt isolated, like it was my fault, and wished I was treated differently.
Engage in self-preservation than team spirit	It can also create a toxic environment where soldiers focus on self-preservation rather than mission success.
undermining teammates	Another way toxic leadership affects morale is by undermining your teammates, like my experience with the CSM.

### Appendix B: IRB Approval

Date: 4-25-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-500

Title: Toxic Leadership: A Phenomenological Investigation of Recently Retired U.S. Army Service Members' Experiences with Toxic Leaders.

Creation Date: 11-6-2022

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Dale Henny

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

#### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB
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#### Key Study Contacts

Member	Role	Contact
Mitchell Morrison	Co-Principal Investigator	[Redacted]
Dale Henny	Principal Investigator	[Redacted]
Dale Henny	Primary Contact	[Redacted]

## **Appendix C: Recruitment Materials**

### **Social Media Recruitment**

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Liberty University. My research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the relational and experiential effects of toxic leadership. The long-term objective is to implement measures and methods to prevent future military members from similar behaviors and adverse effects. To participate, you must have served on active-duty status as a Soldier, retired or have an Expired Terminal Service (ETS) of no more than five years be older than 25 years old, must have had experience with toxic leadership or its adverse effects, and be willing to discuss the experiences and effects of toxic leadership. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview, which should take about 90 minutes. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please direct message me on Facebook, email me at [REDACTED], text, or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx for more information. A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview, and you will need to sign and return it at the time of the interview.

Thank you for considering my request.

**Appendix D: Questionnaire****Screening Questions**

1. Did you serve on active-duty status as a Soldier?  
 Yes  
 No
2. Are you retired or have no more than five years of Expired Terminal Service (ETS)?  
 Yes  
  
 No
3. Are you older than 25 years old?  
 Yes  
  
 No
4. Have you had experience with toxic leadership and suffered its adverse effects?  
 Yes  
  
 No
5. Are you willing to discuss the experiences and effects of your experiences with toxic leadership?  
 Yes  
  
 No



## **Appendix E: Reflective Journal**

### **Participants Interviews - Reflective Journal**

#### **Introduction**

My study aims to deepen the understanding of how toxic leadership affects military personnel, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore and interpret their lived experiences. The methodological approach of this study is fundamentally reflective, involving a continual process of examining my biases and theoretical perspectives to critically understand how they may influence both the research process and the findings.

This self-reflection ensures that interpretations are as objective as possible and rooted in the interview data. This reflexivity is critical in ensuring transparency in how personal and professional experiences shape the thematic insights gleaned from the interviews. By acknowledging and scrutinizing my perspective throughout the research, I aim to thoroughly explore the profound impact of toxic leadership on individuals within the military context.

#### **Reflective Entries**

**Entry 1:** Understanding the Structure and Power Dynamics

**Theme Identified:** Power Misuse and Hierarchical Pressure

**Reflection:** Interviewees like Fred and Sarah highlighted the established power dynamics within the military's strict hierarchy, often leaving little room for recourse against toxic leaders. This environment fosters a culture where leaders can exert control without adequate checks, contributing to pervasive fear and repression among subordinates.

**Entry 2:** Emotional and Psychological Impact

**Theme Identified:** Emotional Toll and Psychological Strain

**Reflection:** Several interviewees, including Owen and Jessica, discussed the severe emotional and psychological impacts of toxic leadership. They noted feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and decreased unit morale and trust. These effects underscore how toxic leadership can influence individuals' well-being in the military context.

**Entry 3:** Cultural Perpetuation of Toxicity**Theme Identified:** Cultural Norms Supporting Toxicity

**Reflection:** The military's emphasis on obedience and the chain of command can inadvertently support toxic behaviors. Interviewees like Tex and George expressed that the cultural norms within the military might stifle dissent and sometimes normalize harmful leadership practices. This reflection leads to an understanding how institutional culture can propagate toxic leadership.

**Entry 4:** Personal Growth and Coping**Theme Identified:** Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

**Reflection:** Despite the challenges, some interviewees, like CSM and JT, shared how they developed personal resilience and coping strategies to navigate the effects of toxic leadership. This insight highlights the adverse effects, the potential for personal growth, and the development of robust coping mechanisms in adverse conditions.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, my analysis of the interviews has highlighted a significant correlation between leadership styles, individual well-being, and organizational culture within the military. The

insights drawn from these discussions underscore toxic leadership's profound impact on military personnel personally and professionally. Furthermore, these reflections emphasize the urgent need for continued research into effective interventions and military policy changes to mitigate toxic leadership's adverse effects.

**Appendix F: Information consent****Consent Form**

**Title of the Project:** Toxic Leadership: A Phenomenological Investigation of Recently Retired U.S. Army Service Members' Experiences with Toxic Leaders

**Principal Investigator:** Dale A Henny, EdD Candidate, Liberty University

**Invitation to be part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be:

- A retired soldier
- Served within the past five years (eligibility determined by providing proof of military ID card)
- 25 years of age and older
- Willingness to discuss experiential effects of toxic leadership

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please read this entire form and ask any questions or points of clarification you identify with before deciding whether to participate in this research.

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

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members. The research will explore the relational and experiential effects of toxic leadership measures and methods to prevent future military members from similar behaviors.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

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

- Complete a qualifying questionnaire (approximately 10 minutes).
- Complete the consent form (about 5 minutes).
- Participate in two interviews: the first, which lasts approximately 90 minutes, and a follow-up interview (if needed for further clarification), which lasts about 30 minutes.

All interviews will be audio recorded using the Voice Memo app on my phone. A portable voice recorder will also run in the background to record audio for backup.

**How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants will not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study.

The findings of this study may contribute to prevention in the military community by understanding the significance of facilitating direct proactive methods to dissuade toxic behavior. This study will investigate the broader concepts associated with toxic leadership from the perspective of recently retired U.S. service members and not confined to prevention methods.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are considered minimal. Discussing the lived experiences of toxic leadership could trigger painful memories. Participants can leave the study at any time without criticism or penalty from the researcher. Participants will also be provided with a list of affordable professional counseling resources and crisis agency information should they need them.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Published reports will not include any identifying information about participants. The individuals participating in the study will be allocated aliases or code names.

- Recordings will be transcribed and kept on a computer for three years after the completion of the study.
- Audio recordings and transcriptions (if needed) will be kept on a computer for three years after the completion of the study.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and access will only be granted to the researcher.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

This study is voluntary, and participants will not receive compensation for participation.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your participation will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, don't hesitate to contact the researcher via email or phone with the associative details included below whenever necessary. Your responses will be recorded and included in the study, but these will not be associated with or directed to any of the engaged participants but their aliases. 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 Dale A. Henny. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact xxx-xxx-xxxx or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Morrison, at [REDACTED].

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

Suppose you have questions or concerns regarding this study and want to talk to someone other than the researcher. In that case, contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you agree 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 of 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.

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

The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

## Appendix G: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

**PURPOSE:** This qualitative phenomenological research study aims to explore the experiences of toxic leadership and associated adverse outcomes from the perspectives of recently retired U.S. Army service members through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

1. Please share a little bit about yourself.
2. When did you join the Army, and why did you join?
3. How long did you serve, and why did you leave the service?
4. Can you describe your overall experience serving in the Army?
5. Can you describe your experience with your leadership during your time in the Army?
6. Can you describe your overall experience serving in the Army?
7. Please describe any encounter or instances of what you would consider toxic leadership during your time in the Army.
  - a. Can you describe the encounter/s?
8. How would you define toxic leadership based on your personal experiences?
  - a. Can you give me examples of behaviors that a toxic leader would display?
9. What personality traits do you think are associated with military leaders who display toxic leadership?
  - a. Please elaborate on your answer.
10. How do you think your experiences with toxic leadership in the Army would be different from experiences with toxic leadership for civilians?
11. How do you think toxic leadership is intertwined with the culture within the military?



- a. Please describe how military culture can create an environment where toxic leadership can thrive and elaborate on the specific aspects of military culture that contribute to this.
12. In your experience, how does the military handle instances when leaders exhibit toxic behavior?
13. How do you think toxic leadership affects morale in the military?
14. How have your experiences with toxic leadership affected you personally?
  - a. Describe how toxic leadership affected you in terms of the following aspects: physical, physiological, psychological, and socio-emotional.