

Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology

(WOP-P)

Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação

Universidade de Coimbra

Toxic leadership determinants: The role of individual and organisational variables

Master's Thesis

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Coimbra, June 2021

Acknowledgements

As I reflect upon this journey, I realize it was the most challenging, fulfilling and transformative as it could have been. I end this life chapter with a profound sense of accomplishment and immensely grateful for all the knowledge and experiences and for the extraordinary people that I have met and contributed to my success as well as the ones that made this possible.

To all my WOP-P professors, thank you for the knowledge sharing, availability and for providing support when needed.

To my tutors, Nuno Rebelo dos Santos and Marco Pereira, thank you for all the help, guidance, understanding and refined intelligence.

A special thanks to professor Leonor Pais, for not letting me give up and for always finding the best solution for me. Thank you for all the sagacity, kindness, understanding and assistance.

To my significant other François, thank you for always believing in me, for giving me strength in my most difficult moments and for making me feel so loved.

To my parents, thank you for supporting my decisions and for celebrating my achievements as if it was theirs.

To my dear friend Andreea, thank you for all the sapience, friendship and for always being there when I needed it the most.

To my friends and colleagues, Beatriz and Camila, thank you for the moments of happiness and support that we shared.

To Susana Carvalho for accepting to guide me in the curricular internship, for all the orientation and for teaching me so much in so little time.

My most sincere thank you.

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Abstract

Research on leadership has been focusing on its positive side, setting aside the negative aspects of leadership. However, since 2000, an effort has been made in this direction. Leaders are toxic when they adopt behaviours that negatively affect their subordinates and the organisation. The studies developed in this field identified some origins, consequences, and impact of toxic leadership. However, there is still scarce research mainly on the association between individual and organisational variables and the perception of toxic leadership. The present study contributes to overcoming that gap in the literature by integrating participants with different professional backgrounds. Therefore, this study has one general aim: to examine to what extent socio-demographic variables (sex, age and education level) and organisational/relational variables (organisation size, employment contract, activity sector, management role, professional situation, work length in the job position, work length in the organisation, length of collaboration with the leader and income) are associated with the perception of toxic leadership, among groups with and without a management role. The sample of this cross-sectional study consisted of 661 participants (58.1% female) with a mean age of 39.77 years from various professional contexts across Portugal. Participants completed a self-reported questionnaire on socio-demographic and organisational variables and the Toxic Leadership Scale. For data analysis, Pearson correlations and tests of mean differences were used. The main findings of this study indicate that, in the assessment regarding the toxicity of the leader, the respondents are affected by various individual and organisational variables representing valuable implications for organisations since it identified the variables that may influence both the exercise and the perception of toxic leadership.

Keywords: Toxic Leadership; Toxic Leadership Scale; Dark Leadership; Determinants.

Introduction

The existence of a dark side of leadership could be traced back to human civilisation, but leadership as a concept has always been a synonym of positivity, and up until now, very few researchers have explored its negative side (Singh et al., 2018). However, an effort has been made to study different negative styles of leadership, namely toxic leadership (Pelletier, 2010), destructive leadership (Aasland et al., 2010), despotic leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), among others. Despotic leadership has been defined as the leaders' propensity to display autocratic and dominant behaviours over their subordinates to pursue self-interest (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). According to Einarsen et al. (2007), destructive leadership behaviour characterises the violation of an organisation's legitimate interests by disrupting its goals and resources and the motivation and well-being of its subordinates. Toxic leadership, which is the present study's focus, is a combination of self-centred motivations and behaviours that have adverse effects on organisations and subordinates (Indradevi, 2016).

Toxic leadership is a negative leadership style that menaces the values and norms of an organisation by developing inappropriate behaviours (Aubrey, 2012). Moreover, due to their behaviour, toxic leaders contribute towards an unhealthy climate that leads to lower productivity (Tavanti, 2011). Additionally, a toxic leader has the potential of affecting their subordinates by impacting their morale and by causing either physical or psychological damage or, in some cases, both (Brown, 2019).

According to Walton (2007) and Mehta and Maheshwari (2013), there has been an increase in dysfunctional and toxic behaviours by those in positions of power and influence. Walton (2007) defended that we, as individuals, have created a myth about leadership, arguing that we tend to view leaders as omnipotent and have unrealistic expectations about them, leading them to believe they are faultless. This author also added that this encourages leadership arrogance and aggrandisement, causing toxic behaviours to emerge.

Several authors (Indradevi, 2016; Tavanti, 2011; Walton, 2007) stated that toxic leadership is a silent killer since it drains the energy out of organisations and competent workers, fostering a demoralising and fearful atmosphere that discourages creative and energetic employees, weakening organisations. Moreover, this type of leadership has no concern for subordinates and organisations, leading to negative effects (Indradevi, 2016) such as decreased job satisfaction (Thoroughgood et al., 2012), turnover intentions, psychological distress and reduced commitment (Pelletier, 2010). Toxic leadership is becoming a growing phenomenon that can have devastating consequences on the health of organisations and inflict severe physical and psychological harm to subordinates. Thus, it is vital to recognise the behaviours of leaders that can be detrimental to the organisation and the well-being of employees (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

The choice of toxic leadership as the topic of the present study lies in the fact that it is a clear and well-defined concept and can be easily operationalized (Mónico et al., 2019). Furthermore, toxic leadership is an integrative concept of previous models of dark leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007). Additionally, there is an instrument that measures toxic leadership with robust psychometric properties validated in Portugal and other countries, allowing cross-cultural comparisons in future research (Mónico et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2008). To the best of our knowledge, there has not been an analysis of the possible influences of individual and organisational characteristics regarding the emergence of toxic leadership. If these associations are observed, then it means that the concept of toxic leadership may be affected by those characteristics. This observation will enable a reflection regarding how far individual and organisational/work characteristics are associated with the perception of leaders as toxic or how far subordinates become favourite targets of leadership toxicity.

The present study aims to determine toxic leadership determinants by examining if and to what extent socio-demographic variables (age, sex, and education level) are associated

with the individual perception of toxic leadership, and if and to what extent organisational/relational variables (organisation size, employment contract, activity sector, management role, professional situation, work length in the job position, work length in the organisation, length of collaboration with the leader and income) are associated with the individual perception of toxic leadership among groups with and without a management role. In this study, it is relevant to distinguish organisational and relational variables, with the latter describing the relationship between the employee and the organisation. Therefore, organisational variables include organisation size and activity sector, and relational variables include the employment contract, management role, professional situation, work length in the job position, work length in the organisation, length of collaboration with the leader and income.

Concerning the demographic variables, the variable age should be considered since the evidence suggests that it influences subordinates' perception of toxic leadership (Özer et al., 2017). A study conducted by these authors examined healthcare workers' perceptions and aimed to understand if their perception depended on individual and demographic characteristics. An association was found between a higher age of workers and a lower perception of toxic leadership. Furthermore, Sezici (2016) showed that younger employees perceived more levels of destructive leadership than older ones.

Gender also appears to be an essential variable since the evidence suggested differences between men and women in leadership preference. For example, a study undertaken by Wałach-Biśta (2019) showed that men preferred more autocratic behaviours while women preferred more democratic ones. Also, a study conducted by Chua and Murray (2015) indicated that women perceived more toxic behaviours from the leader than men since women tended to accentuate negative message connotations, while men emphasised positive ones.

The education level is also an important variable to consider in the study of toxic leadership since there is evidence that individuals with higher education perceive more levels of toxic leadership (Özer et al., 2017).

Regarding the organisational variables, the working length in the organisation, as well as the working length in the job position, should also be considered in the context of toxic leadership since it was found that more years of experience were associated with lower levels of perceived toxicity from the leader (Özer et al., 2017).

Literature has shown that income is associated with the perception of abusive supervision in the organisational context (Gregory et al., 2013). According to these authors, salary can be considered a perceptual measure of the level of output that an individual receives from his organisation. Consequently, a higher income can attenuate the experience of abusive supervision, whereas a lower income will do the opposite. Furthermore, it is possible that an employee, who is more satisfied with his salary, will have higher self-esteem, perceiving less abusive behaviours or causing him not to be a target of such behaviours (Gregory et al., 2013).

The length of collaboration with the leader has shown to affect the level of abusive behaviours displayed by the leader. A study conducted by Zhang and Bednall (2016) showed that the longer the time of collaboration between a subordinate and its supervisor, the stronger it will be the negative association between a supervisor' emotional intelligence and abusive supervision, meaning that, if a leader has a poor emotional intelligence then the display of abusive behaviours will get stronger as the time of collaboration increases.

Regarding the professional situation, literature has shown that the organisational characteristics of public sector organisations, such as strict rules, high power distance and centralised decision-making allows bullying behaviours to take place and reduces subordinates' retaliation (Pate & Beaumont, 2010).

Concerning the remaining variables at the organisation level, such as the organisation size, employment contract, activity sector and management role, the existing research, as far as we could verify, did not address their relationship with the different types of leadership. However, because toxic leadership is a work-related concept, it becomes relevant to include other work-related variables, such as those mentioned.

Conceptual framework

Toxic leadership definitions

There is still no universally accepted definition of toxic leadership in the literature (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021), being the definition proposed by Lipman-Blumen (2005) the most consensual one. According to this author, toxic leaders are “those individuals who, because of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organisations, communities and even the nations that they lead” (p. 2). Reed (2004) defined three dominant qualities of toxic leaders: an evident absence of interest in the subordinates’ well-being, an interpersonal style that affects the organisation’s climate negatively, and the certainty by subordinates that the leader is essentially driven by his self-interest. Despite many authors having different definitions concerning toxic leadership, they all have in common the idea that toxic leadership is poisonous and affects negatively the organisation, its mission and co-workers’ performance and health (Indradevi, 2016; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta & Maheswari, 2014; Tavanti, 2011; Walton, 2007).

According to Schmidt (2008), and from the point of view of toxic leadership assessment, toxic leadership is composed of five dimensions, namely abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion and unpredictability. Abusive supervision includes unprofessional behaviour, which indicates that toxic leaders lack respect for peers

and subordinates, task competence, and personal and professional integrity. Authoritarian leadership refers to the leader's behaviours that restrict the autonomy and capacity for the initiative of his subordinates. Narcissism refers to an interest in oneself and is also called self-love or self-admiration. Toxic leaders exert self-promotion by promoting their interests and threatening rivals or employees who might have remarkable skills. Lastly, unpredictability is a critical component of toxic leadership since toxic leaders do not maintain consistent patterns of behaviour (Schmidt, 2008).

According to Seeger et al. (2005), toxic leaders excel in fighting and controlling their followers rather than elevating them because they are destructive leaders whose focus is on visible short-term accomplishments. Furthermore, toxic leaders exert deviant workplace behaviour by violating established norms, harming the organisation and its members (Indradevi, 2016).

Toxic leadership behaviours

According to Cunha, Rego and Cunha (2007), the existence of negative emotions is inherent to the human experience and organisational life. However, the problem does not derive from its existence but from the way they are managed. The same authors mentioned seven specific conditions that contribute to organisational toxicity, and they are all associated with the leaders' behaviour. The first cause concerns the intention of the leader to cause suffering to its subordinates in a deliberative way. This may stem from the idea that this is the best way to motivate them and from the fear of losing authority or simply by the absence of virtues or values. Managers can also contribute to a toxic organisational environment through their emotional incompetence as they do not reckon the power of their acts that can cause damage to their subordinates. Insensitivity derives from this emotional incompetence of the leader, where he tends to be overly focused on criticising his subordinates. Infidelity

constitutes another possible cause of toxicity as unreliable leaders tend to break the trust bond between them and their subordinates, causing the latter to feel unmotivated, diminishing their loyalty towards the leader. Toxic leaders may be intrusive by manifesting an exaggerated control over their subordinates, leading them to believe they lack the necessary competencies to perform autonomously, decreasing their motivation. Organisational norms can be “institutional inducers” when they do not adjust to specific problems, making the work of subordinates even more difficult. Ultimately, inevitability is present in all of life’s aspects and organisations since it is not possible to avoid tragic events or suffering. However, the main difference between a toxic organisation and a healthy one is that the first tends to ignore or be insensitive to particular situations that require different treatment (Cunha, Rego & Cunha, 2007).

Toxic leaders tend not to give value to the employees, reminding them of their faults in an insensitive way and causing them to feel inadequate by humiliating them (Özer et al., 2017). Some examples of toxic leadership behaviours in the workplace might include blaming subordinates for errors, imposing unreasonable work demands, insulting, destroying employees’ working ability, undermining their achievements, and taking account of their work (Heppell, 2011). Other examples appointed by Walton (2007) included workplace bullying and harassment, deception and fraud in addition to deliberate workplace misinformation and misrepresentation. Furthermore, Lipman-Blumen (2005) stated that toxic leaders display behaviours that range from undermining, demeaning, marginalising, intimidating, demoralising, and vitiating the work environment of their followers. This author also characterised toxic leaders’ behaviours as direct attacks on followers’ character, abilities and well-being. Examples of these behaviours might include leaders going behind others’ backs to achieve their goals, discrediting employees by criticising their work and ideas, judging employees’ attitudes and skills and using strategies to downgrade employees without

cause (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Recently, Labrague et al. (2021) also categorised toxic leadership as a set of unreasonable, unjustified, narcissistic, and self-promoting behaviours.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) also defended that toxic leaders display negative behaviours that tend to degrade their followers' morale, motivation, self-esteem and impose excessive workload onto them. Accordingly, it has been recommended that organisations recognise toxic and destructive leaders and influence them to modify their behaviours to enable subordinates and leaders to work collaboratively towards achieving organisational goals (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

Possible origins of toxic leadership

Regarding the possible origins of toxic leadership, Walton (2007) and Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) proposed similar hypotheses. Walton (2007) defended that leaders can undertake toxic behaviours due to psychological insecurity caused by a perceived threat to their status and power. Similarly, Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) argued that these toxic behaviours could stem from the desire to acquire power and authority that can become an addiction for some leaders. Price (2005) also explained toxic leadership as a self-justification by which leaders see themselves in an unusual situation where ethical principles can be disregarded.

However, while it may be convenient to place the responsibility for toxicity on the leader's behaviour, the situation is more complex (Walton, 2007). Toxic leaders are not the only ones responsible for the negative consequences of toxic behaviours (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). For example, Padilla et al. (2007) suggested that toxic leadership can emerge in the presence of a toxic triangle composed of toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment, which are responsible for adverse organisational outcomes. According to the toxic triangle, the attributes of a toxic leader consist of negative charisma,

personalised power, narcissism, negative life themes and ideology of hate (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Susceptible followers may be conformers or colluders: conformers accept the authority of the toxic leader while colluders support them. Lastly, the conducive environment refers to an environment that sustains the toxic leader, which is created in fragile and unstable organisations characterised by an unethical culture and by the absence of a system capable of supervising power abuse (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). A

Moreover, according to a study conducted by Kusy and Holloway (2009), toxic people tend to thrive in toxic systems. This study demonstrated that the organisations' culture and dynamic could have an essential role in promoting these toxic behaviours. Furthermore, some factors can contribute to the presence of destructive leaders within an organisation. For example, it may be the case that a toxic leader already exists in an organisation. Secondly, it may be that organisations lack the ability (or will) to identify and eliminate a negative style of leadership, creating an environment that promotes this type of behaviour. Additionally, it may be the case that an organisation is aware of the presence of a destructive leader but does not take action because the leader is achieving short-term goals (Erickson et al., 2015).

Lipman-Blumen (2005) suggested that organisations can be facilitators of dysfunctional behaviours when proposing unreasonable goals, fostering excessive competition and a culture that encourages blaming others. Accordingly, toxic organisations prosper through exercising control and subsist in a constant state of crisis (Appelbaum et al., 2007). In a healthy work environment, toxic leaders would most likely be recognised as harmful elements and removed from the workplace (Steiner, 2004). However, in toxic organisations, these leaders would probably not be noticed and would probably be rewarded by the organisation (Appelbaum et al., 2007). This can happen because organisations usually assess leaders through productivity. Hence, a leader that creates an unhealthy work

environment but can achieve short-term goals and solve problems will most probably be rewarded (Appelbaum et al., 2007).

When focusing on toxic leadership, many researchers emphasise the symptoms of toxicity (individual characteristics and traits) but not the disease (culture and climate) (Aubrey, 2012). An organisation's culture can be a key factor in predicting behaviours and outcomes since it may have a moderating effect on the behaviour of its members and may promote toxic behaviours (Aubrey, 2012).

Toxic leaders affect the organisation's culture negatively by engaging in self-destructive behaviours that compromise its values, failing to comply with the organisation's normative standards, and accepting or ignoring the disruptive behaviours of subordinates (Aubrey, 2012). Thus, it is relevant to consider the person-organisation fit that is defined as the congruence between the norms and values of organisations and the values of individuals (Chatman, 1989). Additionally, it becomes useful in this context since it increases the ability to predict how an individual's values will change due to organisational membership and the extent to which an individual will comply with organisational norms (Chatman, 1989). According to Aubrey (2012), a low person-organisation fit can lead to the following possible outcomes: the individual's values can change and become more similar to the organisation's value system, the organisation's values can change, or the person can leave the organisation.

Toxic leaders may contribute to a low person-organisation fit by not complying with the norms and values of the organisation, affecting its culture in a negative way (Aubrey, 2012). On the contrary, a high person-organisation fit could cause the leader to conform to the norms of the organisation, leading him to adopt toxic behaviours to be aligned with the organisational values and culture.

The importance of studying toxic leadership

Toxic leadership has many implications for individuals and organisations (Behery et al., 2018). Research has shown that this phenomenon has been experienced by people in various segments of society and has also revealed the numerous negative effects on employees and organisations (Brown, 2019). The consequences of toxic leadership exceed organisational' economic and performance results. They can affect the health of the employees exposed to this type of treatment (Brown, 2019), causing increased worker absenteeism (Goldman, 2006), job stress (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016), increased employee turnover (Starrat & Grandy, 2010), among many others.

According to a study conducted by Behery et al. (2018), toxic leadership was negatively associated with employees' commitment, trust and organisational citizenship behaviour. Moreover, a study conducted by Hadadian and Zarei (2016) showed that toxic leadership has a significant effect on the job stress of knowledge workers. For that reason, these authors recommended that organisations be aware of their leaders' leadership styles to prevent toxic and dysfunctional behaviours from occurring and stopping them from continuing to happen.

Toxic leaders and their decisions affect organisations and every individual they come in contact with (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) as they can be destructive for all the members of the organisation, causing its fragmentation (Özer et al., 2017). At the organisational level, researchers have found an increase in workplace deviance by subordinates who work for abusive supervisors (Duffy et al., 2002; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) where they display counterproductive behaviours that are usually used to demonstrate retaliation to perceived injustice and that may include sabotaging, providing inaccurate information and not cooperating with a co-worker (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Also, toxic leadership behaviours can cause feelings of helplessness, job insecurity, reduced efficiency, lower job

satisfaction, and psychological and emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, and frustration.

Toxic leadership is also (negatively) related to decent work because work naturally includes leadership and toxic leadership jeopardises work. Decent work is a construct with high legitimacy present in world policies that comes from the International Labour Organization (ILO; the agency of the United Nations for labour issues) that represents people's aspirations for their working lives (dos Santos, 2019), and that is studied by Work, Organisational and Personnel Psychology. The ILO coined the concept of decent work in 1999 to express, in the labour field, the principles and values behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (dos Santos, 2019). Decent work has seven dimensions, and one of them is "fundamental principles and values at work" that measures to what extent the workplace complies with values such as international justice, procedural justice, dignity, participation, freedom, non-discrimination and trust (dos Santos, 2019). Furthermore, the values expressed in this dimension are worthy by themselves since they are in tune with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (dos Santos, 2019). Hence, it can be argued that toxic leadership is negatively correlated to this dimension since toxic leadership does not promote dignity, freedom or trust.

Thus, given that toxic leadership is negatively correlated with decent work, a concept that seeks to guarantee universal human needs, it is crucial to study toxic leadership in order to have a greater understanding of its impact on individuals and organisations so that this phenomenon can be fought.

Aim of the study

This study has one general objective: to examine to what extent socio-demographic (sex, age, education level) and organisational/relational variables are associated with the

perception of toxic leadership between groups with and without a management role. In this study, it is relevant to distinguish organisational and relational variables. Organisational variables include organisation size and activity sector, and relational variables include employment contract, management role, professional situation, work length in the current job position, work length in the organisation, length of collaboration with the leader and income.

Work is one of the most critical areas of our lives, and accordingly, it is critical to maintaining a healthy working life. In this way, it is vital to study the construct of toxic leadership because it is a relevant and current concept since it represents the exercise of leadership in a detrimental way over subordinates. Furthermore, understanding toxic leadership determinants will enable a better comprehension of this phenomenon, providing scientific knowledge for organisations to better understand their leaders' behaviours and thereby help them modify or improve their actions. In this way, it is an ethical responsibility to fight this type of detrimental leadership.

Method

Participants

The study sample was composed of 661 workers divided into two groups: without a management role ($N = 505$) and with a management role ($N = 151$). In the first group, there were more women (62.2%, $n = 314$) than men (37.8%), with an average age of 39.77 years ($SD = 11.75$) and had been working in the organisation on average for 11.53 years ($SD = 10.66$). In the second group, there was a balanced number of men (56.3%, $n = 85$) and women (43.7%), with an average age of 42.96 years ($SD = 11.32$), and had been working in the organisation on average for 14.65 years ($SD = 11.19$). The detailed characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

	Without a management role (n = 505)		With a management role (n = 151)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sex				
Male	191	37.8	85	56.3
Female	314	62.2	66	43.7
<i>Missing responses</i>	-	-	-	-
Education level				
Basic Education	128	25.3	43	28.5
Secondary Education	216	42.8	45	29.8
Higher Education	161	31.9	62	41.1
<i>Missing responses</i>	-	-	1	-
Activity Sector				
State Worker	174	34.5	43	28.5
Private Worker	329	65.1	107	70.9
<i>Missing responses</i>	2	-	1	-
Employment contract				
Service Provider	23	4.6	9	6.0
Open-ended contract	173	34.3	24	15.9
Fixed-term contract	303	60.0	116	76.8
<i>Missing responses</i>	6	-	2	-
Income				
Less than 500€	73	14.5	5	3.3
501-1000€	300	59.4	78	51.7
1001-1500€	91	18.0	32	21.2
More than 1500€	25	5.0	28	18.5
<i>Missing responses</i>	16	-	8	-
Organisation size				
Small company	235	46.5	70	46.4
Medium company	114	22.6	33	21.9
Large company	152	30.1	44	29.1

<i>Missing responses</i>	4	-	4	-
Work length in the job position				
Up to 6 months	30	5.9	8	5.3
6 months – 1 year	66	13.1	9	6.0
More than 1 year	374	74.1	124	82.1
<i>Missing responses</i>	35	-	10	-
Length of collaboration with the leader				
Up to 1 year	48	9.5	13	8.6
More than 1 year	142	28.1	44	29.1
<i>Missing responses</i>	315	-	94	-
		<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>M (SD)</i>
Age		39.77 (11.75)		42.96 (11.32)
Work length in the organisation		11.53 (10.66)		14.65 (11.19)

Measures

The Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS; Schmidt, 2008; Portuguese version: Mónico et al., 2019) is composed of 30 items, which are answered on a six-point response scale ranging from “totally disagree” (1 = my leader is not like that”) to “totally agree” (6 = my leader is exactly that way). The TLS is composed of five factors: abusive supervision (7 items; referring to hostile behaviours from the leader to their subordinates, e.g., “ridicules subordinates”), authoritarian leadership (6 items; referring do the leader’s behaviours that restrict the autonomy of their subordinates, e.g., “controls the way subordinates perform their tasks”), narcissism (5 items; concerning the fact that the toxic leader has a self-image of great importance, an inability to show empathy and despises the efforts of others, e.g., “feels that has special rights”), self-promotion (5 items; referring to the selfish behaviours of the leader, such as despising the talents of their subordinates, e.g., “only offers help to people that can bring advantages”) and unpredictability (7 items; concerning to the unpredictable behaviours of the leader that confuses the subordinates, e.g., “expresses anger to subordinates for no

apparent reason”; Mónico et al., 2019). All the scale factors presented a good internal consistency in the Portuguese version ($\alpha = .87$). In the present study, the scale also presented a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$).

All participants also filled a questionnaire composed of 12 questions regarding socio-demographic questions (e.g., age, sex, education level) and questions related to their professional situation and the organisation they belong to. In addition, regarding the organisational variables it was assessed: the organisation size, professional situation (public or private sector), employment contract (service provider, fixed-term contract, open-ended contract), management role (with or without a management role), activity sector, work length in the organisation, work length in the job position, length of collaboration with the leader and income.

Procedure

Data were collected by Psychology students from a Portuguese public university. Data collection was part of the research methods training, aiming at developing skills both in ethical and technical procedures concerning psychometric measurement. Each student was instructed to collect between three to five questionnaires in their network of personal relationships. The low number of participants given to each student aimed to strengthen the quality of data, since the students could choose people from their relations who were available and willing to cooperate in the task. Each student signed the informed consent and elaborated a report related to each participant. This report contains information on the application context of the questionnaire, previous relationship between the student and the participant and possible questions or doubts placed by the respondent, as well as the students' responses.

Moreover, each participant signed the informed consent as well. Each student signed a term of responsibility, ensuring the veracity of the collected data. Data collection was carried out between 2018 and 2019. Regarding the content of the informed consent, each participant knew the purpose of the research project and was assured that individual data was confidential. Furthermore, the research team committed to ensuring the voluntary nature of the study to each participant and to inhibiting the individual identification of the respondents. Lastly, the research was conducted according to the Ethical Code of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists.

Data Analysis

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS; version 22.0) for data analysis. Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation, frequencies) were used to characterise the sample. Pearson correlations were used to analyse the association between the continuous variables (age and work length in the organisation) and the dimensions of toxic leadership. Parametric and non-parametric tests were used to compare groups in categorical variables. Specifically, multivariate analysis of the variance (MANOVA), Kruskal-Wallis test (for comparison of three or more independent groups) and Mann-Whitney test (for comparison of two independent groups) was used. Furthermore, *post-hoc* tests with Bonferroni adjustment when appropriate were conducted in the presence of statistical differences.

Results¹

Individual variables

¹ In every table title, the *n* corresponds to the number of respondents in each variable.

Regarding the association between work length in the organisation and toxic leadership, for participants with a management role, the results indicated a significant and negative correlation between work length in the organisation and the dimension “abusive supervision” ($r = -.18, p = .024$) and “unpredictability” ($r = -.19, p = .022$). Specifically, a longer time working in the company was associated with a lower perception of abusive supervision and unpredictability (see Table 2). No significant correlations were found for age. No significant correlations were found for participants without a management role for both ages and work length in the organisation.

Table 2

Correlation between age/work length in the organisation in each toxic leadership dimensions (participants with a management role) (N = 151)

	Age	Work length in the organisation
Abusive Supervision	-.08	-.18*
Authoritarian Leadership	.003	-.14
Narcissism	-.06	-.15
Self-promotion	-.002	-.08
Unpredictability	-.11	-.19*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Regarding sex, no significant differences were found on the dimensions of toxic leadership among those with a management role and without a management role.

Regarding the education level, among those with a management role (see Table 3), the results indicated significant differences in the dimension “authoritarian leadership” ($p = .010$). Specifically, individuals with basic education reported significantly higher authoritarian leadership scores than those with secondary education ($p = .033$) and university

studies ($p = .016$). For participants without a management role, no differences were found regarding the education level.

Table 3

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership by education level (for participants with a management role) ($N = 150$)

	Basic Education ($n = 43$)	Secondary Education ($n = 45$)	Higher Education ($n = 62$)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M (DP)</i>	<i>M (DP)</i>	<i>M (DP)</i>		
Abusive Supervision	2.49 (1.41)	2.16 (1.33)	1.99 (1.09)	2.07	.130
Authoritarian Leadership	3.05 (1.20)	2.42 (1.20)	2.41 (1.08)	4.74	.010
Narcissism	3.44 (1.58)	2.31 (1.42)	2.95 (1.48)	1.77	.174
Self-promotion	2.76 (1.61)	2.24 (1.48)	2.39 (1.35)	1.45	.237
Unpredictability	2.96 (1.56)	2.46 (1.42)	2.45 (1.45)	1.74	.179

Regarding the employment contract (service provider, fixed-term contract, open-ended contract), no significant differences were found on the dimensions of toxic leadership among those with a management role and without a management role.

Organisational variables

Regarding the professional situation (public or private sector), among participants with a management role, the results indicated significant differences on the dimensions “abusive supervision” ($p = .026$), “authoritarian leadership” ($p = .018$) and “unpredictability” ($p = .021$). Participants who work in the private sector scored higher in abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership and unpredictability than those working in the public sector (see Table 4). For participants without a management role, the results indicated significant differences on the dimensions “narcissism” ($p = .032$) and “unpredictability” ($p = .022$).

Participants who work in the private sector scored higher in narcissism and unpredictability than those working in the public sector (see Table 5).

Table 4

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership between public and private sectors (for participants with a management role) (N = 150)

	Public sector	Private sector	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n = 43)</i>	<i>(n = 107)</i>		
	<i>M (DP)</i>	<i>M (DP)</i>		
Abusive Supervision	1.82 (1.00)	2.33 (1.34)	5.04	.026
Authoritarian Leadership	2.24 (0.98)	2.74 (1.23)	5.71	.018
Narcissism	2.86 (1.31)	3.17 (1.56)	1.32	.252
Self-promotion	2.41 (1.34)	2.47 (1.52)	0.06	.809
Unpredictability	2.17 (1.25)	2.78 (1.53)	5.47	.021

Table 5

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership between public and private sectors (for participants without a management role) (N = 503)

	Public worker	Private sector worker	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n = 174)</i>	<i>(n = 329)</i>		
	<i>M (DP)</i>	<i>M (DP)</i>		
Abusive Supervision	2.06 (1.12)	2.28 (1.21)	3.77	.053
Authoritarian Leadership	2.49 (1.04)	2.64 (1.17)	1.91	.167
Narcissism	2.70 (1.45)	2.99 (1.48)	4.62	.032
Self-promotion	2.29 (1.30)	2.47 (1.32)	2.28	.132
Unpredictability	2.47 (1.31)	2.77 (1.42)	5.29	.022

Regarding the organisation size (small company, medium company, large company), no significant differences were found on the dimensions of toxic leadership among those participants with a management role. However, for participants without a management role

and considering the organisation's size, the results indicated a significant difference in the dimension "narcissism" ($p = .016$). Furthermore, participants who work in small companies scored higher in narcissism than those working in medium (the difference was not significant $p = .676$) and significantly higher than those working in large companies ($p = .012$) (see Table 6).

Table 6

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership by organisation size (for participants without a management role) (N = 501)

	Small company (n = 235)	Medium company (n = 114)	Large company (n = 152)	F	p
	M (DP)	M (DP)	M (DP)		
Abusive Supervision	2.31 (1.25)	2.22 (1.15)	2.03 (1.09)	2.58	.077
Authoritarian Leadership	2.67 (1.23)	2.53 (0.99)	2.53 (1.04)	0.92	.399
Narcissism	3.07 (1.55)	2.87 (1.39)	2.64 (1.36)	4.17	.016
Self-promotion	2.49 (1.39)	2.45 (1.30)	2.27 (1.19)	1.26	.285
Unpredictability	2.82 (1.47)	2.54 (1.30)	2.54 (1.30)	2.42	.090

Regarding the working length in the job position, among participants with a management role, the results indicated significant differences on the dimensions "abusive supervision" ($p = .033$) and "unpredictability" ($p = .025$). Participants who work in the job position less than a year scored higher in abusive supervision and unpredictability than those working in the job position for more than one year (see Table 7). For participants without a management role, no significant differences were found in the dimensions of toxic leadership.

Table 7

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership by work length in the job position (for participants with a management role) (N = 141)

	Less than one	More than one	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	year	year		
	(<i>n</i> = 17)	(<i>n</i> = 124)		
	<i>M (DP)</i>	<i>M (DP)</i>		
Abusive Supervision	2.82 (1.39)	2.11 (1.26)	4.63	.033
Authoritarian Leadership	2.96 (1.26)	2.58 (1.19)	1.54	.217
Narcissism	3.62 (1.62)	3.06 (1.48)	2.15	.145
Self-promotion	2.89 (1.79)	2.42 (1.45)	1.51	.222
Unpredictability	3.39 (1.86)	2.52 (1.42)	5.13	.025

Regarding income, among participants with a management role, the results indicated significant differences in the dimensions “abusive supervision” ($p = .025$) and “authoritarian leadership” ($p = .013$). Participants who receive less than 500€ scored higher in abusive supervision than those who receive between 501€ and 1000€ ($p = .364$), between 1001€ and 1500€ ($p = .039$) and more than 1501€ ($p = .363$). Participants who receive more than 1501€ scored higher in authoritarian leadership than those who receive less than 500€ ($p = .989$), between 501€ and 1000€ ($p = .730$) and between 1001€ and 1500€ ($p = .006$) (see table 8). For participants without a management role, no significant differences were found in the dimensions of toxic leadership.

Table 8

Differences in the dimensions of toxic leadership by income (for participants with a management role) (N = 143)

	Less than	501-1000€	1001-1500€	More than	Kruskal -Wallis H	<i>p</i>
	500€	(<i>n</i> = 78)	(<i>n</i> = 32)	1501€		
	(<i>n</i> = 5)			(<i>n</i> = 28)		
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank		
Abusive Supervision	94.10	76.84	53.31	75.93	9.36	.025
Authoritarian Leadership	80.00	77.14	50.97	80.29	10.80	.013
Narcissism	84.30	74.65	56.06	80.63	6.73	.081

Self-promotion	67.40	73.38	57.38	85.68	7.31	.063
Unpredictability	84.00	75.06	56.50	79.05	6.17	.104

Regarding collaboration length (with the leader), no significant differences were found between individuals with and without a management role.

Discussion

The present study had the general aim to verify if and to what extent socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex and education level) and organisational/relational characteristics (organisation size, activity sector, employment contract, management role, professional situation, work length in the current job position, work length in the organisation, length of collaboration with the leader and income) are associated with the perception of toxic leadership among workers with and without a management role.

An overall view of the results indicates that individual and organisational characteristics are associated with subordinates' perception of toxic leadership and its dimensions. In general, there were more significant associations in the group of individuals with a management role. Specifically, in individuals with a management role, those who have a lower level of education, who work in the job position for less than one year and receive a lower income, perceive more levels of toxic leadership. Furthermore, in the same group, a longer working time in the organisation was associated with less perception of toxic leadership. There was a significant association between the organisation size and toxic leadership among individuals without a management role. Specifically, individuals that work in smaller companies perceive more levels of toxic leadership. In both groups, individuals who work in the private sector perceive more levels of toxic leadership. Regarding the remaining variables such as age, sex, employment contract, and length of collaboration with

the leader, there were no statistically significant associations between them and toxic leadership dimensions among both groups.

A more detailed view of the results presupposes a negative relationship between work length in the organisation and the dimensions “abusive supervision” and “unpredictability” in the group with individuals with a management role. Individuals with more years of work in the organisation perceive lower levels of toxic leadership, namely abusive supervision and unpredictable behaviours from their leaders. These results corroborate the findings of Özer et al. (2017) that showed that participants with more working experience scored the lowest in the dimensions of toxic leadership. These results may be explained through a dispositional perspective in which more experienced workers tend not to consider the leader as an obstacle to their career since career goals have lost significance to them, making them less sensitive to toxic behaviours (Özer et al., 2017). However, if we assume a situational perspective, leaders may exercise less toxic behaviour in the presence of older workers out of respect since older workers tend to be treated with more dignity and respect than younger ones (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Furthermore, Sezici (2016) showed that young and inexperienced employees were more exposed to destructive leadership and had higher perceptions of these behaviours from their leaders.

Concerning age, there were no statistically significant associations between this variable and the dimensions of toxic leadership among both groups. These results go against Sezici (2016) findings that showed that age was a significant determinant regarding the evaluation of destructive leadership of employees in health care. Additionally, the author concluded that younger employees perceived more levels of destructive leadership than older ones.

Regarding the level of education, individuals with basic education scored higher in “authoritarian leadership” than those who have a higher education, meaning that individuals

with lower studies perceive more authoritarian behaviours from their leaders than those who have secondary education and higher studies. In general, individuals with a lower level of education scored higher in all dimensions of toxic leadership. The fact that individuals with a higher level of education had lower scores on the dimensions of toxic leadership may be explained by the idea that education might help deal with fear and anxiety, providing more tools to deal with toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Moreover, research has shown that abusive behaviours from the leader may not be as detrimental for employees with greater job mobility since they have more attractive employment alternatives and can distance themselves from the source of their distress (Tepper, 2000). This situation may be the case for individuals with higher levels of education that can make effective efforts to move to other workplaces if they are targets of these harmful behaviours. Additionally, individuals with a lower level of education are more susceptible to be targets of toxic leadership than those who hold higher educational levels. Toxic leaders can find it easier to express toxic behaviours with lower-educated workers, and they may fear some type of retaliation from those who are more qualified.

As for the professional situation, the results indicated significant differences on the dimensions “abusive supervision”, “authoritarian leadership”, and “unpredictability” among individuals with a management role. There were differences in the dimension of “narcissism” and “unpredictability” for individuals without a management role. Regarding both groups, participants who work in the private sector scored higher in these dimensions than those who work in the public sector. However, literature has shown that workplace bullying exerted by the leader is more prone to happen in the public sector, where the strict rules, increased power distance, and centralised decision-making reduces subordinates’ reactions and allows leaders to abuse their authority in ways that can harm their subordinates (Pate & Beaumont, 2010).

Concerning the organisation size, differences were found among individuals without a management role on the dimension “narcissism”, with participants who work in small companies scoring higher in this dimension than those working in medium and large ones. This result can be explained by the idea that, in small companies, leaders have more opportunity to express narcissist behaviours, whilst in medium and large organisations, these behaviours would probably go unnoticed.

Concerning the working length in the job position, differences were found among individuals with a management role on the dimensions “abusive supervision” and “unpredictability”. Participants who work in the job position for a shorter time perceive more toxicity levels from their leaders than those working for a longer time. This situation may be since a new person in the workplace is naive regarding organisational functioning and consequently is easy to become a target of abusive behaviours. These results corroborate the findings of Özer et al. (2017), showing that more years of working experience were associated with lower levels of perceived toxic leadership. A possible explanation for those results is that senior professionals are less naive and potential toxic leaders avoid targeting them. Additionally, more experienced workers had time to seek workplaces where they are respected, no longer remaining with toxic leaders.

Concerning income, differences were found among individuals with a management role in “abusive supervision” and “authoritarian leadership”. Participants who receive a lower income perceive more toxic behaviours from their leader, specifically abusive and authoritarian behaviours. Also, participants who receive a higher income perceive more authoritarian leadership from their leader. This contradiction can be attributed to the fact that regardless of the workers’ income, they can be both targets of abusive behaviours from the leader or perceive such behaviour. Considering the findings of Gregory et al. (2013), individuals who are more satisfied with their salary tend to be in a higher self-esteem

position, being less likely to suffer supervisor's abuse. However, individuals who have a lower income and, therefore, may not be satisfied with their pay may be more likely to perceive or suffer more toxic behaviours from their leader.

Regarding sex, there were no significant differences among individuals with and without a management role. However, these results go against the study's findings conducted by Chua and Murray (2015) and by Singh et al. (2018) that found that women perceived more toxicity from their leaders than men. Also, according to Ouyang, Lam and Wang (2015), women are considered to be more relationship-oriented and value social support, while men are more task-oriented and tend to focus more on personal success. Thus, female subordinates tend to respond more strongly towards abusive treatment from the leader, while this behaviour seems less significant for male subordinates (Ouyang, Lam & Wang, 2015).

Results indicate that the length of collaboration with the leader is not associated with toxic leadership. This situation could mean that more or less time with the same superior does not influence the behaviour displayed. Nevertheless, these results go against the findings of Zhang and Bednall (2016) that demonstrated that a long time of collaboration between the subordinate and its supervisor mediated the relationship between the supervisors' emotional intelligence and the abusive behaviours displayed, meaning that if a leader has a poor emotional intelligence, then the display of abusive behaviours will get stronger as the time of collaboration increases.

The employment contract was not associated with toxic leadership. There were variations regarding the perception of toxic leadership among the three categories in the group with a management role. However, in the group without a management role, individuals with an open-ended contract perceived higher levels of toxic leadership in all dimensions of toxic leadership, except in "self-promotion". We can speculate that individuals with a more precarious work condition perceive more toxic behaviours from the leader since

they may feel the need to maintain diplomatic interactions with the leader and do not retaliate because they fear losing their job.

Conclusion and contributions

These results presuppose that, in the assessment regarding the toxicity of the leader, respondents are affected by various individual and organisational variables. Our results indicate that socio-demographic and work-related attributes are relevant factors regarding toxic leadership, meaning that the perception of toxic leadership is affected by those characteristics. Specifically, professional situation, income, education level and organisation size show a more significant relationship with the construct of toxic leadership.

Furthermore, this observation allows us to reflect on how far these characteristics are associated with subordinates' perception of leaders as toxic or how far subordinates become favourite targets of leadership toxicity. Moreover, the present study contributes to overcoming the literature gap due to its innovative nature regarding the role of individual and organisational variables in the perception of toxic leadership.

Limitations

It is essential to mention some limitations of the present study. One of the limitations consists of the study's design (cross-sectional) that does not allow establishing causality relations between the studied variables. Another limitation regards the sampling method (by convenience) that does not enable the generalisation of results. Furthermore, being a study focused on self-reported assessment also entails some biases that may derive from its nature (Singh et al., 2018), including potential social desirability.

Future studies

Considering that the variables measured in the present study are constantly changing, it will be beneficial to perform a longitudinal analysis to verify how those variables may vary over time, allowing to establishing causal relationships between them. Moreover, it could be essential to explore how the management role of intermediate leaders influences the perception of toxic behaviours from the leader.

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