

Toxic leadership and academics' work engagement in higher education: A case study from Chile

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(Published online 2022: Educational Management Administration & Leadership
DOI: 10.1177/17411432221084474)

ABSTRACT

The concept of toxic leadership has been widely investigated in diverse settings with most contributors agreeing its impact on followers can have negative effects to the victim's well-being, job satisfaction, group productivity and organisational commitment. The concept has not yet been sufficiently researched in tertiary educational settings, however, and in this case specifically in Chilean higher education. This paper explored whether toxic leadership was present in country's universities and, if so, to assess its impact over academics' work engagement. A cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted, using a sample of 592 academics from two different Chilean universities, who voluntarily responded to two validated scales: One to measure toxic leadership perceptions (Schmidt's toxic leadership scale) and other one to measure work engagement (UWES^R work engagement scale). The results corroborated the presence of toxic leadership in the consulted institutions, but a significant relationship between this style of leadership and work engagement was not established. This finding suggests that, even though the participants recognise the presence of toxic leadership, work engagement was not necessarily affected by their leader's behaviour.

Key words: toxic leadership, work engagement, higher education, time perception.

Introduction

Leadership theory seeks to explain behaviours of those with formal responsibility within a system, understanding that the most successful and effective leaders are those who can inspire others through their decisions and actions (Author, 2012). This does not always happen, however, and in some circumstances and contexts this occurs in a way that can negatively affect the outcomes of the organisation, not being able to build environments of

collaboration, respect or fulfilment. Consequently, it is possible to find leaders who ‘intentionally, or unintentionally, inflict harm upon their constituents’ (Pelletier, 2012: 412). Such behaviour has been recognised as *toxic* or *destructive* leadership.

In an effort to understand how such leadership behaviours emerge and develop many authors have delved in its traits and impact (e.g. Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Krasikova, 2013; Padilla, 2007; Pelletier, 2012; Schmidt, 2008) which leads us to conclude that overall it can be considered as a leadership style based on the physical and emotional impairment of people, with harmful consequences for their followers at a personal and organisational level. Toxic or destructive leaders engage in negative behaviours with volitional intention (Krasikova, 2013), which cover ‘several distinct, but related dimensions of negative leadership’. Smith & Fredericks-Lowman (2019) summarise three key elements in this type of leadership:

- lack of concern for the well-being of their followers;
- a personality that can negatively affect organisational climate, and;
- actions motivated primarily by self-interest.

The results of these behaviours typically are reflected not only in the organisation, but also on the people with whom such leaders work. Repercussions fall mainly on aspects of mental and physical health, with a direct effect on work effectiveness and commitment (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Regarding this, and as a person’s motivation plays a key role as one of the most powerful predictors of success in the workplace, concepts derived from it such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment have been reported as the most frequent dimensions and shown to be diminished by such leadership (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Fitzgibbons, 2018; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Schmidt, 2014; Webster et al., 2014).

Research within existing literature regarding toxic leadership has been mainly focused within military, business and health care related settings, but proves to be scarce in the education environment and especially related to higher education. Blasé & Blasé (2002) and Oplatka (2017) have both focused on exploring toxic leadership traits in schools, noting that teachers

can be exposed to emotional abuse from their headteachers or principals, with the effects of such mistreatment being extremely harmful to professional and personal lives. Similarly, within Chile, Aravena (2019) recorded the presence of toxic leadership in primary education, introducing behaviours reported by teachers that exhibit autocratic leadership, poor communication, inconsistent behaviour and poor strategic skills. Only one investigation was found that related exclusively to people working in tertiary education (Fahie, 2019) and, to date, there have been no investigations associated with toxic/destructive leadership in Chilean higher education. The research reported here focuses on determining whether harmful leadership style is evident in the context of higher education in Chile and is based on surveys carried out in 2019 with academic staff in two universities.

Toxic leadership defined

The concept of toxic or destructive leadership, the 'dark side of leadership' (Craig & Kaiser, 2012), can be defined as the summation of characteristics and behaviours within leadership that can adversely affect the outcomes of an organisation or the well-being of their employees. In this way, as Craig (2017) explains, toxic leadership can be acknowledged as an instance of abuse of a leader-follower relationship, in which the leader may 'move the group or organization into a worse condition than it was before - long-term organizational sacrifice being sacrificed for short-term gains' (183). Pelletier (2010: 377) adds, that in order

... to distinguish bad from toxic leaders, one must consider the leader's effect on the followers. If the follower is physically or psychologically harmed by the leader's actions, and that impairment is long-lasting, the leader can be considered toxic.

This harmful type of leadership is described by different terms, being recognisable mainly as toxic or destructive (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Krasikova, 2013; Padilla, 2007; Pelletier, 2010; Pelletier, 2012). It is possible, however, to find some common denominations and dimensions to clarify what should be understood about such leadership styles. A destructive leader exhibits 'harmful behaviour imbedded in the process of leading' suggests Krasikova, (2013: 1310) which can be channelled in two different ways: the leader encourages their followers to pursue destructive goals or uses methods of influence. In some cases, these

actions can even occur together. However, it is important to note, whatever the behaviour, there must be a volitional nature in the decision of harm-doing, differentiating it from merely ineffective leadership. Thus, destructive leadership must be intentional, as in the way the leader chooses to adopt these types of conducts, despite other valid and ethical choices. This definition is consistent with other destructive leadership explanations, such as that of Aravena (2019), who notes this kind of leadership must be associated with systematic practices, 'not just episodic actions or decisions' (84). Destructive leadership also considers other characteristics, such as dominance, manipulation and a selfish orientation, which result in 'outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents and detracts from the realization of the organization's purposes' (Craig & Kaiser, 2012: 4).

Craig (2017), however, helpfully establishes a difference between toxic and destructive leadership in referring to the time needed to harm an organisation. In this perspective, in contrast to being destructive, a toxic leader is understood as one who has a slower influence, which 'can be appealing to some members who will willingly adapt their own patterns of behaviour to accept it' (184). Taking this into consideration, this research has utilised the notion of toxicity to relate to any kind of harmful leadership.

Traits and dimensions of toxic leadership

As cited above, many authors note the common attributes and specific behaviours that toxic leaders display which result in abusive compliance, with a consequent decline in followers' morale, self-esteem and performance. Pelletier (2010) suggests a typology of toxic leaders based on eight dimensions: attack on followers' self-esteem, lack of integrity, abusiveness, social exclusion, divisiveness, inequity, threats to security and *laissez-faire*, also understood as the absence of direction. She concludes that the most frequent and harmful toxic actions are the influence over self-esteem and lack of integrity. Alternatively, Schmidt (2008) defines and operationalises toxic leadership within five main dimensions, which include abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, unpredictability and self-promotion. These dimensions can be explained and compared with other similar definitions:

Abusive supervision: the concept is closely related to tyrannical styles of leadership, which involve abusive management. Bell (2017) describes a series of behavioural dispositions that describe this model: '(a) arbitrariness and self-aggrandizement, (b) belittling subordinates, (c) lack of consideration, (d) a forcing style of conflict resolution, (e) discouraging initiative, and (f) non-contingent punishment' (29). Overall, the main characteristic that encompasses all these demeanours is their emphasis on hostility. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the experience of hostility may depend on the subjective perception of the subordinate, which can vary depending on the leader-follower relationship (Craig & Kaiser, 2012). The main consequences reported by victims of abusive supervision are negativity to job satisfaction and organisational commitment, being directly proportional with their intentions to leave the organisation, and decrease in the quality of relationships between work colleagues (Craig & Kaiser, 2012; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

Authoritarian leadership: based on the use of total control and personal dominance, it is suggested that toxic leadership is propitiated where a directive leadership style exists, linked to a top-down transactional model (Craig, 2017; Padilla et al, 2007). Authoritarian leadership refers to destructive behaviour, in which the leader adopts complete authority and control over their subordinates, demanding unquestionable obedience (Bell, 2017).

Narcissism: Also associated with autocratic styles of leadership (Padilla et al, 2007), narcissism can be considered as a critical part of the toxic leadership paradigm. Dominated by self-centred, dominant features, a narcissistic leader can demonstrate a 'grandiose sense of entitlement, self-focus, inflated self-esteem and intense competitiveness' (Hogan & Hogan, 2001: 1323), with actions triggered mainly by egotistical needs (Oplatka, 2017). This type of leader also demands abusive obedience and is highly capable of disregarding other people's needs when setting a goal, driven by a selfish need for power (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Krasikova et al, 2013;

Padilla et al, 2007). From an educational point of view, Oplatka (2017) adds that narcissistic leaders 'might be intolerant of criticism from teachers and stakeholders' and 'enjoy manipulation of others and adopt a distorted stance of reality that is reinforced by their position' (5).

Unpredictability: unpredictable negative behaviours from a toxic leader may worsen and exasperate the negative results of their actions. Unpredictability relates to instability, which can weaken the morale of their subordinates and therefore diminish their performance.

Self-promotion: refers to 'enhancing the impression of the self to others', in contrast to narcissism which focuses on 'self-oriented actions designed to primarily enhance the self to itself' (26). Self-promoting behaviours are intended to make the self stand out above the rest by discrediting others' performance, especially that of subordinates.

Contributors tend to agree most toxic leadership characteristics relate to abusive leadership and narcissism, such as excessive control, abuse of power and a need to be at the centre of attention. Aravena (2019) adds to the understanding of this harmful leadership style, however, when identifying that the perceptions of people subjugated to toxic leaders do not always coincide with their perceptions of job experience. In his study with elementary school teachers in Chile, he concludes that autocratic leadership and poor communication are the most mentioned behaviours. When asked to recognise what school principals do to be perceived as toxic leaders, inconsistent or erratic behaviour and poor strategic skills were the most frequent characteristics reported, thus demonstrating that perceptions of leadership and real experiences do not necessarily coincide.

The toxic triangle

None of the dimensions described above can thrive, however, without the interaction of the environment in which the leader operates. As Padilla et al. (2007) describe there must also be present two key elements together, *susceptible followers* and *conducive environments*, which allow this harmful kind of leadership to endure. As can be seen in Figure 1, susceptible followers are defined as subjects who consciously choose to subjugate themselves to the leader, in a passive (conformers) or active way (colluders).

Conformers accept the authority of toxic leaders, adhere to instructions given by the leader and due to their unsatisfied needs, they are vulnerable to the leader's influence. Colluders support the toxic leaders and contribute to toxic vision of the leader (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013: 5).

Under this premise both behaviours end up involving a state of repression and susceptibility, which can influence their actions and well-being.

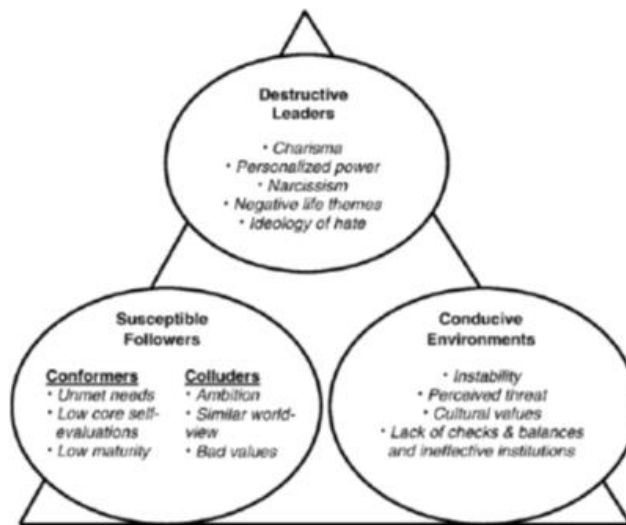


Figure 1. Toxic triangle and domains related to toxic leadership (Source: Padilla et al. 2007, p. 180)

The term 'conducive environment' refers to the context in which the toxic leader can succeed, as 'multiple contextual characteristics can form various holistic patterns that may

affect leadership differently' (Larsson & Hyllengren, 2011: 20). Under this premise, cultural values are considered a significant factor which allow toxic leadership to endure, mainly focused on the lack of support that victims receive from their organisations (Webster et al, 2014). It is important to consider that:

an organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and symbolic level. (Tierney, 1988: 3).

If the leader faces no repercussions for their behaviour or manages to achieve desired outcomes without being sanctioned, as may be the case in a conducive environment, it is more likely to prolong this model over time (Craig, 2017). Thus, 'a toxic culture is sometimes difficult to detect from outside the organization, and for that reason often more difficult to deal with' (Craig, 2017: 184), as once established, it can be very difficult to overcome (Fahie, 2019).

The impact of toxic leadership on well-being

It is widely accepted that one of the most serious consequences of toxic leadership relates to the followers, not only affecting their work appreciation and environment, but also their personal development and wellbeing. Schmidt (2014), for example, provides evidence that toxic leadership has direct effects on people's job outcomes through group cohesion, affecting areas such as job satisfaction, group productivity and organisational commitment. Webster et al. (2014) similarly also identify various distressing consequences on the welfare of followers, which can be manifested as physical health issues (insomnia, weight loss/gain, digestive problems, headaches, hair loss), emotional harm (mistrust, anger, fear) and psychological effects (loss of self-confidence, anxiousness, depression).

The construct of work engagement was first described by Schaufeli et al (2004), who recognised it as a multidimensional concept, or 'a positive, fulfilling, affective motivational state of work-related well-being that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption'.

Vigour is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work (Bakker et al., 2008, p.188).

Overall studies agree on the importance of engagement in workers' performance and motivation, with Bakker et al. (2008) claiming that engagement can be actively predicted by job and personal resources, such as performance feedback, self-efficacy and self-esteem. As Schaufeli et al. (2006) explain, 'engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities, and they see themselves as able to deal well with the demands of their jobs' (702).

Toxic Leadership in education settings

Oplatka (2017) points out (when talking about schools) 'irresponsible educational leaders might not only impede any moral development in the staff room but rather also deter teacher-student relations' (8). Under this prospect, the concept of work engagement becomes an important aspect to consider and the effects in schools that the diminishment of job satisfaction may have on teacher engagement and motivation towards their pedagogic work become particularly relevant.

In higher education, leadership relationships may also be influenced by factors related to the cultural environment, such as organisational structures and hierarchies, which can enable competitive cultures (Sisto, 2018). In this way, Fahie (2019) highlights universities as institutions particularly susceptible to bullying, 'given their decentralised organisational structures and explicit hierarchical power structures' (346). Moreover, Bendermacher et al (2017) attribute the emergence of policies centred on quality monitoring approaches and market driven strategies, which can affect the worker's perception of the type of leadership under which they are directed, as 'increased attention to quality management yields

opportunity costs and can meet reluctance of academics who feel these procedures are externally constructed, managed and imposed' (Bendermacher et al, 2017: 40). In the same way, Waters (2018) also recognises a shift in how higher education is being conceived, from a 'public good to a private investment in one's own career' (730), with change towards 'more hierarchical forms of leadership (including class divisions between academics and administrators)' (730). According to Smith & Fredricks-Lowman (2019), there is also an important focus on corporate models of management and training, in which 'emphasis is placed on accomplishing the mission more than how the mission is accomplished' (7). This can relate to the 'lack of diverse thought when it comes to problem solving departmental or institutional financial challenges, engaging/supporting students as part of retention efforts, and innovating curriculum or student services' (8).

A work environment that enables a toxic leadership style has proved to influence employees, who have their goals and well-being affected. Just as in other areas in which toxic leadership has been widely studied, such as corporate or military environments, higher education also experiences the consequences of this kind of leadership, including increases in absenteeism and turnover (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2019). Blasé & Blasé (2002) highlighted this problem in schools as being as a direct result of the victim's inability to have viable opportunities for recourse:

because of the organizational culture and off-putting management practices, victims' complaints about abusive bosses usually result in (a) no action (i.e. no response) from upper-level management/administration and departments of human resources, (b) efforts to protect an abusive boss, and/or (c) reprisals against the victim for registering complaints (679).

In this regard Fahie (2019), in his research of Irish academics in HE affected by toxic leadership, shows how interviewees emphasise their distrust in the educational system, since, although they recognise formal complaint channels do exist, they do not use them due to the lack of appropriate means of protection for victims. In addition, it is mentioned how academics consider that the promotional systems also fail to properly reward leaders, as they

concentrate on those who achieve specific goals focused on productivity over leadership practice itself.

Globally, the introduction of managerialism in higher education can be considered a double-edged sword when understanding leadership behaviour, since although the diversification of areas and greater competitiveness are promoted, it is also observed that it can lead to 'an erosion of the value of the traditional ethos of higher education via its system-immanent drive to adhere to the demands of a market economy' (Feldges et al, 2015: 4). As this approach may put higher demands on the leaders in charge, it is possible that it could encourage more autocratic methods, negative practices and allowing the emergence of destructive styles of leadership.

Higher Education in Chile

Higher education in Chile is an educational system with institutions of different nature, open to an increasingly numerous student body. It has seen rapid growth and diversification in the current century, with more than one million students enrolled per year (CNED, 2020) and a total of 61 universities, 43 professional institutes and 48 training centres, offering a complex and heterogeneous variety of programmes (Scharager, 2018). During the same period there have been changes to university structures and policies including setting regulatory frameworks for diversification with restrictions on access to public funds, meaning that competition is openly encouraged (Scharager, 2018).

This appears to have led institutions to adopt managerial approaches, subjecting them to focus on competitiveness, increasing their internal efficiency and productivity (Guerrero, 2007). The approach adopted has allowed an important diversification of the academic offer, but the current framework of governance, 'developed in response to changing political circumstances in the past' (OECD, 2013: 157) is considered rigid in its structure and organisation, and 'managerialism promoted by this model is strongly linked to the promotion of authoritarianism as a management mode' (Sisto, 2018). Institutions in Chile thus exist

with varied levels of autonomy and quality, but provision is overall based in a market-driven approach, with managerial aspects that determine goals and objectives underpinned by policies focusing strongly on quality assurance (OECD, 2013).

As Guerrero (2007) explains universities in Chile, whether private or state-owned, operate on three general levels:

- the *strategic level*, with superior or central authorities, which shape institutional strategic decisions and government;
- the *middle line*, or the instance of linkage of the strategic level with the operational level, comprising all academic units under the direct dependence of the superior authorities (mainly faculties); and
- the *operational level*, comprised of all academic organisations of disciplinary nature, which are oriented to the management of academic training programs, disciplinary research work or studies applied to the community, providing services to productive or social sectors.

This organisational framework reveals the hierarchical nature of HE in Chile, which although it focuses on rigid structures with defined functions, is in turn diversified into a set of units that may allow the decentralisation of leadership and management. HE institutions have adapted and professionalised their administrative structure, incorporating management professionals designated to hold academic-administrative positions (Scharager, 2018). Understanding that this approach can normally be associated with authoritarian forms of leadership, it is possible to assume that a rigid environment could be more likely to be considered toxic. Within the academic arena (the middle line and operational level), however, there tends to be a different scenario. Leaders designated to direct academic units do not necessarily have formal leadership induction or training, as selection only relies primarily on track record and relative experience in similar positions. One explanation that may rationalise this is that leaders are chosen due to personal traits instead of empirically

based leadership practises (Aravena, 2019). Taking this into account, a gap in educational leadership can be evidenced, as 'leadership is viewed as inspirational models with examples of *how to be* rather than *what to do*' (Aravena, 2019: 85-86).

The research conducted for this paper, therefore, sought to examine whether academic members of two HE institutions in Chile considered toxic leadership existed in their work environment and, if so, what impact it had on their engagement. Demonstration of these behaviours is sometimes difficult to achieve, considering that many times these kinds of leaders become increasingly hard to unmask due to the obstacles that exist in achieving the victim's report of this type of abusive leadership. The explanation of this has been difficult to articulate, since there are many factors that determine the endurance of a toxic leader, especially in educational organisations (Oplatka, 2017).

The available literature supports the negative impact of toxic leadership on people, specifically at work and personal levels. The consequences of its endurance over time have been extensively analysed (Bell, 2017; Craig & Kaiser, 2012; Krasikova et al; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Oplatka, 2017; Pelletier 2010 & 2012; Schmidt, 2014) and some studies have noted the different strategies that the victims apply to cope with and overcome the oppressive and debilitating style of this leadership model (Webster et al 2014; Pelletier 2011). The most frequent and undesirable repercussion relies mainly on evading, rather than confronting the leader, with determinant consequences such as leaving the organisation, taking leave and/or bypassing the leader (Webster et al, 2014). It has not been possible, however, to find evidence which explains how the different characteristics of toxic leadership can affect the dimensions of a subject's work commitment, specifically within the educational area. It is known in school settings that the work of a teacher is strongly influenced by their sense of vocation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and teachers may often maintain themselves in adverse scenarios as because of that. This factor was also featured in the enquiry we carried out in two Chilean universities.

Methodology

This investigation focused on whether there was evidence of toxic leadership impacting on academics' work engagement in Chilean HE and any impact on their work engagement. Also, it aimed to establish the impact of time on the perceptions of toxicity of those consulted, considering that past experiences could differ from current ones.

The research consisted of a quantitative cross-sectional study, developed through the application of Schmidt's (2014) Toxic Leadership Scale (which evaluated the dimensions of abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, unpredictability and self-promotion) and the shortened version of the Utrecht work Engagement Scale (UWES) (which measured the three dimensions of vigour, absorption and dedication).

Schmidt aimed to create an indicator which could account for aspects identified in destructive leadership, but at the same time 'embrace a singular definition of toxic leadership as a distinct construct' (Fitzgibbons, 2018: 81). Although Schmidt's (2008) initial scale consisted of 80 items, a shortened version was validated and applied in subsequent studies (Schmidt, 2014), consisting in fifteen assertions related to all five dimensions of toxic leadership. Its validity is confirmed through suitable reported reliabilities, as 'the Cronbach's alphas for the five subscales follow: self-promotion ($\alpha = .85$), abusive supervision ($\alpha = .79$), unpredictability ($\alpha = .85$), narcissism ($\alpha = .81$), and authoritarianism ($\alpha = .84$)' (Schmidt, 2014: 32). After its development, this scale has been used in various studies, mainly focused on areas related to militia and healthcare, confirming its validity and relating its dimensions to negative repercussions within the work environment (Schmidt, 2014; Ozer et al, 2017; Singh et al; 2017; Bell, 2017; Fitzgibbons, 2018). No evidence has been found, however, related to the use of this scale in the educational context.

Similarly, work engagement measurement was created in 2002 by Schaufeli et al through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), and since its development, its psychometric properties have received notable support (Mills et al, 2011). Originally, the questionnaire consisted in 17 assertions (UWES-17), related to the three subscales of the concept (vigour,

dedication and absorption). Successive psychometric evaluations have shortened it to just nine items (UWES-9), turning it into the scale that is currently used (Mills et al, 2011). Like this, 'the presence of the three sub-dimensions raises the possibility of interpreting scores on the UWES-9 on two levels, namely on a total scale level (Work Engagement) and on a subscale level (Absorption, Dedication, and Vigor)' (de Bruin & Henn, 2013). It is important to emphasise, however, that although the scale is described as multidimensional, there have been questions about its dimensionality. Despite this, Mills et al (2011) and de Bruin & Henn (2014) agree that UWES-9 could serve as viable. Reported reliabilities (Cronbach's α) of the UWES-9 total scores across 10 different countries varied between .85 and .92, which is 'satisfactory' (de Bruin & Henn, 2014: 790). Their findings thus confirm multidimensionality of the instrument, with a strong general factor that is observed through all the items, but also a lack of discriminant validity of the subscales. As the authors explain, this means that 'attempts to interpret and use separate subscale scores lack an empirical foundation and are likely to be unproductive' (796), thus it can be concluded that when evaluating the results, the interpretation of a total score is more justified.

The study population were HE academics from two different private Chilean institutions, similar in size and number of students. The research was conducted under the ethical criteria established by the British Educational Research Association (2018). A non-probabilistic sample of 1514 people were included, distributed in five faculties between the two universities. Questionnaires (based on Schmidt's (2014) Toxic Leadership Scale and UWES-9) were delivered online through Survey Planet^R and answered anonymously, to keep the minimum bias possible and protect the identity of the participants. The online questionnaire was configured so that every participant who answered having no toxic leadership experience immediately finished the survey, thus avoiding the chance of altering the results of the other scales. Everyone who reported experience of toxic leadership, went on to complete the toxic leadership and engagement scales.

Findings

In the subsequent data analysis the scores obtained from 592 respondents (39 per cent of the total sample) in relation to the toxic leadership and engagement scales were averaged based on the normative scores established by the authors (Schaufeli & Bakkar, 2004; Schmidt, 2014), which allowed the results to be grouped into low, medium and high levels. 211 (26 per cent of respondents) indicated they had experienced toxic leadership, with women marginally more in the majority (54.5 per cent). Total values show high levels of toxicity, with narcissism being the aspect most often cited.

Table 1: Summary of Toxic Leadership Scale

	Self-promotion	Abusive Supervision	Unpredictability	Narcissism	Authoritarian Leadership
Mean	3.04	2.88	2.94	3.12	2.78
Median	3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	3.00
Mode	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
SD	2.41	2.30	2.23	2.37	2.27
Variance	1.55	1.52	1.49	1.54	1.51

Work engagement results were analysed grouping the three dimensions into a total score according to normative scores delivered from the authors of the UWES-9 survey.

Table 2: UWES-9 descriptive statistics.

	<i>Vigour</i>	<i>Dedication</i>	<i>Absorption</i>	<i>Total Score UWES</i>
Mean	4.04	4.72	4.35	4.37
Median	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Mode	5.00	6.00	6.00	6.00
Variance	2.28	2.04	2.33	2.29
SD	1.51	1.43	1.53	1.51

To investigate the potential impact of toxic leadership on work engagement, Pearson correlation test was used and revealed an absence of association between the variables. Overall, it emerged, levels of work engagement do not seem to be affected by the kind of supervision.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation test scores.

	Self-promotion	Abusive Supervision	Unpredictability	Narcissism	Authoritarian Leadership	Total Score
<i>Self-promotion</i>	1					
<i>Abusive Supervision</i>	0.75073978	1				
<i>Unpredictability</i>	0.74488524	0.73833799	1			
<i>Narcissism</i>	0.8157475	0.75530555	0.75065998	1		
<i>Authoritarian Leadership</i>	0.64884434	0.66071256	0.67609907	0.69601809	1	
<i>Total Score</i>	0.01232793	-0.04017613	0.0136745	-0.00202002	0.01743467	1

Further analysis of the data investigated whether the present or previous experience of toxic leadership had any impact in the degree of appreciation of the academics about their leader. This objective was undertaken by inferential analysis, seeking to establish certain relationships between the variables. A mean comparison was carried out in the first phase with the Student's T test, in case the data behaved normally, and in a second place a median comparison, through the Mann-Whitney U test. The p-value for each of these tests was less than 0.05, showing for all dimensions of the toxic leadership scale, a higher degree of them is reported by academics who acknowledged having a current experience. This suggests that previous experience can diminish the negative appreciation of the leader.

Table 4: p-values for mean and median comparisons.

P-value table	Mean comparison T test	Median comparison U test
Self-promotion	0.0007176	0.003179
Abusive Supervision	0.0001927	0.0005763
Unpredictability	0.02671	0.04415
Narcissism	0.001537	0.002944
Authoritarian Leadership	0.01478	0.02296

Discussion and conclusions

This study investigating whether there is evidence of toxic leadership impacting on academics' work engagement in Chilean higher education. As demonstrated earlier,

research regarding toxic leadership is scarce in education, especially related to higher education. Whilst authors such as Blasé and Blasé (2012), Oplatka (2017) and Aravena (2019) have delved into this kind of leadership in primary and secondary education, little has been said concerning how toxic leadership can affect higher education academics well-being and organisational commitment. In fact, for this research, only one investigation was found that related exclusively to people working in tertiary education (Fahie, 2019). As previously mentioned, evidence shows that there exists a negative association between toxic leadership, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Bell, 2017; Krasikova et al, 2013; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Schmidt, 2014), but relationship with engagement remains unclear.

The present study thus aimed to inquire into this uncertainty, by first seeking whether there was evidence of toxic leadership in Chilean tertiary education. 30 per cent of academics within the two universities investigated acknowledged having lived toxic leadership experiences, of which 40 per cent indicated such experiences were current. The analysis of the relationship between these aspects and the ones corresponding to the toxic leadership scale, showed there are dimensions that seem more powerful than others, depending on how much time the academics spend their time in the institution. In this way, the type of attendance defines which dimensions most affect academics: Full-time professors were the ones who suffered the most from the self-promotion and narcissism from their leaders, while part-time academics were more affected by unpredictability and authoritarian leadership. These results contrast with the findings of other authors such as Fahie (2019), who in his study of toxic leadership experiences in Irish higher education, concluded that toxic traits of leaders in education were particularly negative for part-time employees.

Abusive supervision was not recognised, however, as a dimension that could influence perceptions significantly. Overall, narcissism was considered the dimension reported with the highest degree of toxicity, so this aspect is important to consider when defining the main features of toxic leadership in this environment, a finding which agrees with features found

by (Fahie, 2019) who placed 'egocentrism as a central component to toxic leadership' (343). If Chilean context is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to understand why academics determine this dimension as the most serious, since, as it was detailed in previous sections, in the competitive environment that exists, self-reference and the need to stand out above the rest seems to become an effective tactic to maintain positions of authority.

There are numerous investigations that recognise and define different traits of a toxic leader, but none agrees that one can prevail over the other. Schmidt (2014: 47) established a direct negative relationship between toxic leadership and four job outcomes, including job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Moreover, Hadadian & Sayadpour (2018), identified a direct correlation between destructive leadership and job stress, affecting features such as interpersonal conflicts, quantitative workload and organisational constraints (142). At the same time, Fahie (2019) highlighted in his research how importantly work engagement and productivity could be affected by toxic leadership. As is obvious, these results contrast with the findings of our study, which although focused on a different aspect of work well-being, still relates to the concepts these authors develop.

These findings are important, therefore, insofar as they explain that the type of attendance does influence the leader's appreciation, but they do not show categorically how harmful traits can influence their performance. The most important results, linked to the research questions and hypotheses, yielded unexpected results, since in the first instance, a relationship between the degree of toxicity of the leader and the level of engagement was not identified. Contrary to the expected result, despite the existence of average to high perceptions of toxicity in the work environment, none of the academics surveyed reported a decrease in their commitment. Thus, there remains no evidence of decreased levels of work engagement in the presence of toxic leadership.

Explanations for this result may be difficult to elucidate, but there can be interpretations to understand the behaviour of the findings. Firstly, it is important to consider the significance

of callings or vocation on work-related outcomes. As Duffy et al. (2011) suggests, 'experiencing a calling to a particular career is likely to lead to one to become committed to that line of work' (216). Hence, as academics in higher education are mostly professionals who teach and work within their disciplines of knowledge, a special emphasis must be put on the fact that university academics, especially part-time professors, frequently decide to engage in teaching mainly because of vocational purposes. Also, in some cases, not having an exclusive bond to the institution they work for could maintain their engagement high due to driven values, or the will to work more towards the aim than towards the person who leads them. Taking this into consideration, it is possible that they may be more willing to accept and endure in adverse environments.

Findings of other authors such as Aravena (2019) can somehow be compared to what was reported in this research, as in his exploratory study of destructive leadership in Chilean primary education, he concludes that perceptions and real experiences of this harmful leadership style may not always coincide. In other words, toxic leadership behaviours are not necessarily attributable to work experience (including all that the concept embraces, such as work engagement) directly. Although these findings are based in limited personal perceptions of certain kind of teachers, they should not fail to consider the fact that 'personal values and traits have more impact than management aspects on the perception of destructive leaders' (Aravena, 2019: 92).

Schmidt (2014) also posits that work satisfaction involves various aspects, not only the leader's performance. As he recognises, one of the limitations of his study was not to consider that although turnover intentions can often be associated to the type of leader that commands, they can also be sometimes completely unrelated. Taking this into consideration, a person's own perception can greatly vary the level of motivation and work commitment.

The last justification that could relate to the results relies in the nature of the universities' administrative structure in Chile. As noted previously, these universities operate within a hierarchical framework, with units in charge of well-differentiated authorities. Taking this into account, it becomes frequent that academic heads may not always have direct contact with those who compose the teaching staff, since normally communication is carried out through middle leadership actors, who channel requests according to what is needed. According to Blasé & Blasé (2002), interactionism is key to define the impact of a determined relationship, as this social enquiry rests in the premise that individuals act pushed by personal meanings that are derived from the social interaction that individuals have with one another. Consequently, these 'meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by individuals to deal with the things and other people they encounter' (p. 679). Therefore, if the interaction with the leader is poor, negative appreciations may not necessarily have implications for academics' performance in the classroom.

The last question we aimed to answer was how current or previous experience of toxic leadership could influence the nature of the responses, presuming that current experiences would consider more toxic traits than the past ones. Results were categorical in that current experiences were reported as demonstrating greater toxicity of the leader. The reasons may be explained by the hypothesis, cited mainly in psychological phenomena, known as Contraction Bias in which there exists behaviours and judgments that skew perceptions according to the time in which they have been lived. Considering this, if a person were subjugated to past toxic leadership experiences, normally the analysis of the event could be underestimated, as there are no present facts that determine their judgment. It is understood that by adaptation processes, the mind tends to forget negative facts or underestimate them, in an unconscious desire to improve (Ashourian & Loewenstein, 2011); this can be fully supported in the investigation.

Final Conclusion

It is agreed the repercussions that toxic leadership has on a person's well-being usually relate to aspects compromising their mental health and work commitment (Krasikova et al, 2013; Pelletier, 2010; Webster et al, 2014). Even though participants in this study report being submitted to high levels of leader toxicity, it was demonstrated that their perception of commitment is almost unaltered, leading to the conclusion that there may exist no strong relationship between toxic leadership and engagement in higher education. Finally, it becomes clear that a leader's perception of toxicity tends to fade over time, which can be dangerous in terms of not effectively quantifying the damage a toxic leader can inflict in its followers. As a conclusion, the results of this study show that toxic leaders do have an impact on academics, although it does not seem to impact their degree of dedication to work.

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