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# TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON FOLLOWERS AND THE COMMAND AT THE UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY

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# THESIS

**TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT
ON FOLLOWERS AND THE COMMAND AT THE
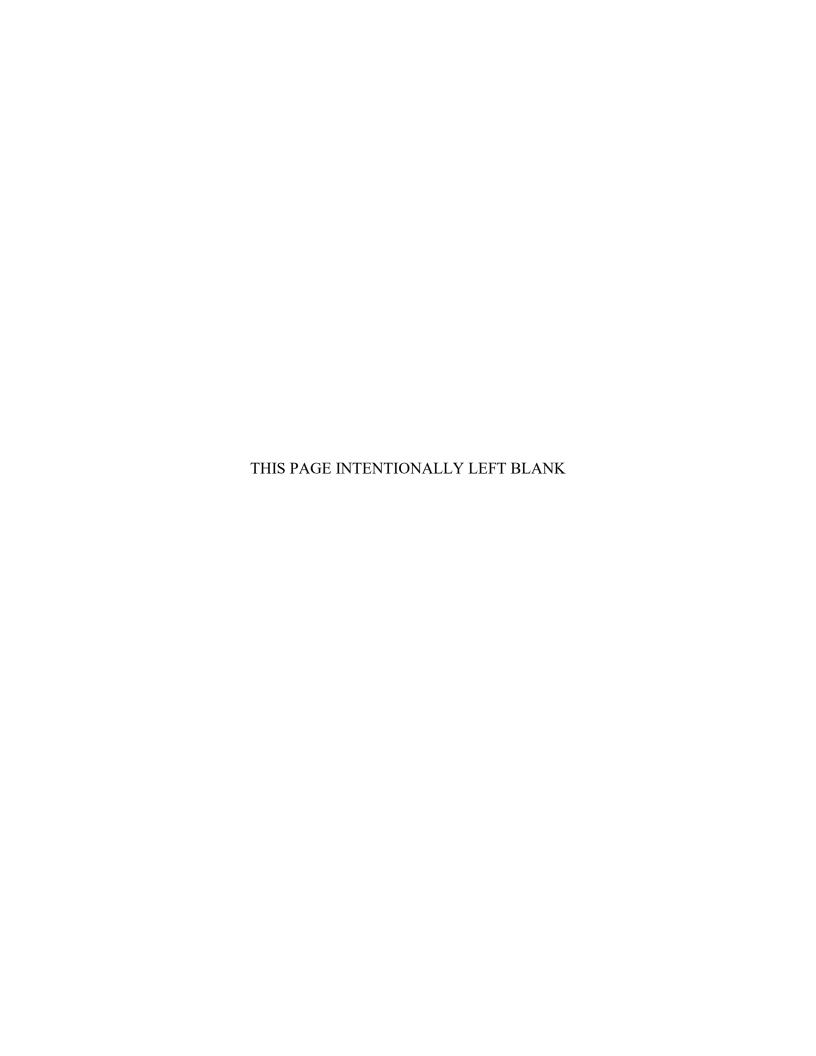UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY**

by

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June 2022

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The purpose of this thesis is to determine if the toxic leadership model proposed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser in 2007 is supported by data collected at the United States Naval Academy in 2018. Specifically, that when a subordinate ranks their leadership low due to toxic leader traits, they will have lower organizational commitment indicating a more conducive environment, and trust for their peers will be lower indicating that there are susceptible followers who are either conforming to the toxic leadership or colluding with the toxic leadership.

The analysis of the data showed that there was a moderate correlation between the existence of a toxic leader and a conducive environment, even after accounting for susceptible followers. This correlation supports part of Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's 2007 toxic leadership model, that when a toxic leader exists there also exists a conducive environment, specifically that subordinates identify less strongly with the institution. No correlation was found between susceptible follower and toxic leader or susceptible follower and conducive environment. Further study is recommended on this topic to clarify whether a conducive environment allows a toxic leader to manifest, or if a toxic leader contributes to and creates a conducive environment.

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**PROFESSIONAL MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

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# I.    INTRODUCTION

## A.    BACKGROUND

The mission of the United States Naval Academy (USNA) is, "To develop Midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically, and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty in order to graduate leaders who are dedicated to a career of naval service, and have potential for future development in mind and character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship, and government" (United States Naval Academy [USNA], n.d.c.). Moral leadership is essential to the proper functioning of America's Navy. The trust imbued in our officers is unparalleled given the amount of autonomy required to operate at sea. With so much power, responsibility, and autonomy, toxic leaders can have a severe impact on the fleet, and the Naval Academy is the largest single source for Naval Officers.

The Naval Academy is a developmental institution that teaches Midshipmen how to be officers. USNA is often referred to as a "leadership laboratory," where Midshipmen can practice a multitude of different leadership styles to see the effectiveness with little to no consequences. As such, Midshipmen are entrusted with leadership responsibilities with low amounts of supervision. For every 150 Midshipmen, there is one Company Officer and one Senior Enlisted Leader. This is an unheard-of ratio at any other command, and the only reason this is possible is due to the leadership by Midshipmen. In most communities, the first time a ratio like this is reached is around the 20-year mark in someone's career; however, that command is also filled with a Wardroom of about 15 officers and a very experienced Chief's Mess of about 20 Chiefs. The Naval Academy is the only place where officers with five years of experience will lead this many people with barely any support. The low level of supervision of Midshipmen leaders could potentially result in toxic leaders being placed in positions of power and going undetected. If so, these leaders can then go on to the fleet and continue to negatively impact the Navy.

Identifying a toxic leader is difficult until they are in a position where these traits can come forward. The effects of a toxic leader though do not have to have disastrous

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consequences. There are countless anecdotes of lower-level leaders and followers neutralizing the effects of a toxic leader. The Naval Academy attempts to develop ethical leaders through multiple avenues, one of which is its formal leadership classes. In NL310 (Leadership Theory and Application), Midshipmen are taught about ethical leadership and toxic leaders. The toxic leadership model developed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) is taught as well as how to not be a toxic leader. In theory, toxic leadership can be negated by removing one leg of the toxic leadership triangle, the toxic leader, susceptible followers, or a conducive environment. This research aims to answer the following questions:

- Does the toxic leadership model of a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment manifest at the Naval Academy?

- Are susceptible followers or a conducive environment more closely correlated with the existence of a perceived toxic leader?

## B. BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

This research will examine whether the proposed model of the toxic leadership triangle (Padilla et al., 2007) can be seen in data collected at the United States Naval Academy in 2018 from Midshipmen. The study provides insight into the relationship between a toxic leader, their followers, and the follower's commitment to the institution. This knowledge will enable leaders at the Naval Academy to understand how a toxic leader impacts the unit and how to make the culture of the Naval Academy as well as individual Midshipmen more resilient to the influence of toxic leadership. If the Midshipmen can learn to counter the effects of toxic leadership in a relatively less-impactful training command, then once the Midshipmen commission as Ensigns and 2nd Lieutenants, they can lead the charge to fix the cynicism and toxicity that exist in non-training commands. The study provides recommendations the Naval Academy can implement in their training to mitigate toxic leaders.

## C. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The scope of this study is to determine if the data collected in 2018 at the Naval Academy supports the toxic leadership model that Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) proposed. The existence of a key toxic leadership trait as reported by followers is then compared to the follower's perception of their peers as well as the institution. This report is limited to a one-time collection of data. The survey was only performed at the United States Naval Academy, and was not performed at other service academies, training, afloat, or ashore commands. The questions asked were not designed to validate the toxic leadership model, but rather were part of a larger survey broadly addressing topics to include organizational culture, ethical leadership, and trust among Midshipmen.

## D. METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected from USNA midshipmen in fall of 2018. The survey contained questions addressing organizational culture, ethical leadership, and trust. The methodology used involves Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses to determine how one variable of the toxic leadership triangle can affect the other two legs of the triangle. A literature review was first performed to analyze a plethora of theses, articles, books, and other studies on toxic leadership and how to combat its effects. The comparison will help guide future leaders and Midshipmen to recognize signs of toxic leadership, make positive changes to mitigate toxic leadership, and mentor the next generation to continue this proactive approach.

## E. ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The introductory chapter covers the intent and background of the study focused on toxic leadership and the Naval Academy. Chapter II is the literature review, covering the three components required for a destructive leader to manifest. Chapter III covers the methodology and data analysis. The methodology discusses how the data was collected and why each variable was chosen from the data. Chapter IV, results, focuses on the correlation between a toxic leader and susceptible followers as well as a conducive environment. Chapter V, the closing chapter, contains recommendations and conclusions.

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# II.     LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic leadership requires the three components of the toxic triangle in order to manifest: a toxic leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007). The leader by themself is not the determining factor for whether or not toxic leadership exists. Toxic leadership impacts unit civility and higher levels of unit civility act as a moderating influence on toxic leadership (Gallus et al., 2013). Linked with unit civility are ethical leadership and inclusiveness (Javed et al., 2018). There is a link between negative perceptions of leadership, negative perceptions of peers, and negative perceptions of the institution. The negative perceptions of the institution often manifest as cynicism (Pitre, 2004).

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) established the toxic leadership triangle model. Each component has multiple factors that lead to the manifestation of that component. Each of these components are closely linked. As we analyze each component, they should tie in to the other two components assuming that leadership is based in relationships and relationships involve multiple people and the situation they are in. In the sections that follow, we review the literature with respect to each of the three legs of the toxic leadership triangle: toxic leadership, susceptible followers, and conducive environment. Additionally, we also review ethical leadership, inclusiveness and cynicism and their influence on the components of the toxic leadership triangle.

## A.     TOXIC LEADERSHIP

A lack of ethics is the distinguishing characteristic that sets a toxic leader apart (Padilla et al., 2007). This is often driven by a combination of, "a personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate" (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 180). Schmidt and Hanges (2009) describe toxic leaders as, "authoritarian narcissists who unpredictably engage in political behaviors and authoritarian supervision" (p. 29). There is a difference between a leader who demonstrates abuse, egotism, and power and one who is a toxic leader; a toxic leader may be these things but will also be self-promoting and unpredictable (Gallus et al., 2013). This unpredictability and focus on self

directly impact their followers psychologically and affect the organizations they lead (Gallus et al., 2013).

Within the Navy, toxic leadership is not uncommon even among Commanding Officers of ships. An average of 12 are fired per year, about two-thirds of them for personal behavior (Sutherland, 2011). The role of a Commanding Officer is unique in that they exercise total control over their ship when underway with no external supervision onboard. This same dynamic does not exist at the Naval Academy, but that does not negate toxic leadership. "The midshipmen interviewed believe that qualities of good leaders, as they are taught, are not being acknowledged by the administration when it comes time to picking the leadership of the brigade … you end up with people in a position who don't really have a following of respect" (Pitre, 2004, p. 36). Midshipmen believe that toxic leaders rise to power at the Naval Academy because the people put in charge of selecting high-level Midshipmen leaders do not actually interview the candidates well or ask the tough questions, but instead just look at the numerical values representing their academic and physical mission areas. This breeds cynicism among the underclassmen, and when one of those Midshipman leaders begins to falter or struggle the underclassmen are quick to highlight their failures. A vicious cycle is then born with the Midshipman leader potentially retaliating or responding in a negative fashion, driving to further cynicism and a disconnect between leadership and the rest of the Midshipmen. This is a hard problem to fix without giving all students a peek behind the curtain into the selection process, and even that might not entirely address the issue.

## B.    SUSCEPTIBLE FOLLOWERS

According to Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007), "Two types of followers support destructive leadership. Conformers passively allow bad leaders to assume power because their unmet needs and immaturity make them vulnerable to such influences. Colluders support destructive leaders because they want to promote themselves in an enterprise consistent with their worldview" (p. 185). At the Naval Academy, Midshipmen are required to be no older than 23 on July 1 of the year of admission and cannot be younger than 17 (USNA, n.d.b.). This gives rise to a student body with an age range from

17–27; all students go through the same indoctrination program called Plebe Summer and all are still learning what it means to be a military officer. As Belz (1999) stated, "The Naval Academy as a learning institution controls more aspects of a student's (midshipman) life than any other institution of higher learning" (p. 19). This high level of control leads to the followers receiving their needs from authority figures and, due to their age, there is less maturity than an older group. Furthermore,

> The hierarchical nature of the military is necessary for ensuring that standards are maintained and that orders are followed under duress, toxic leaders likely understand that the power differential between superiors and subordinates may limit a target's options for responding to the abusive behavior. Indeed, it is likely that most service members feel they cannot push back against their abusive leaders, as doing so would go against the very values they were taught to uphold (e.g., chain of command, mental toughness). Targets who do confront their abusers may be perceived as insubordinate and pursuing options outside one's chain of command would be perceived by most as a violation of military cultural norms. (Gallus et al., 2013, p. 590)

Given these factors together, midshipmen meet the vulnerability criteria laid out by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007). Additionally, Mitchell (1999) found for females, "the additional strain of assimilating into a male dominated culture may contribute to the problems some female midshipmen experience while trying to adapt to the Naval Academy (military) environment" (pp. 86–87). As a whole, Midshipmen fall into the conformer category but some may become colluders. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) identify colluders as those who have ambition and congruent values and beliefs with the toxic leader. For Midshipmen, there is a potential to become a colluder to gain power or favors.

In 1938, the role of the Company Officer and Midshipman changed. "It was now the responsibility of the commissioned Battalion Officer and Company Officer to ensure that the brigade operated with midshipman administration and officer supervision rather than officer administration with midshipman assistance. This clearly shows the intention that the midshipmen should be gaining leadership experience from occupying these positions" (Belz, 1999, p. 18). Since this time, Midshipmen have been placed in leadership positions that gave them power. They are entrusted with maintaining and enforcing the standards. This dynamic creates space for those with ambition to seek power and for those

in power to overlook rule infractions and create a double standard. This in turn leads to a lowering of unit morale (Miller, 2006) and helps create a more conducive environment for toxic leadership. This opportunity for colluders combined with the majority of conformers leads to followers who meet Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2007) metric for susceptible followers.

While followers can either allow toxic leadership to occur, or contribute to it, the opposite is also true. "Our findings suggest that followers are more agentic than previously suggested. We show that followers not only choose to unfollow their leaders but also actively work to neutralize the influence of toxic leaders through workarounds and learning" (Milosevic et al., 2020, p. 117). This demonstrates that followers who are not vulnerable to toxic leadership or willing to collude with a toxic leader can counteract the toxic leader's effects.

> Organizational commitment was also found to have moderating effects on the two (abusive supervision and narcissism) out of five dimensions of toxic leadership and safety performance relationships. For abusive supervision and narcissism, we are able to show that employees with higher organizational commitment are capable of managing the negative impact of abusive supervision and narcissism. (Saleem et al., 2021, p. 12)

Given Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2007) prediction that a toxic leader needs the three parts of the toxic triangle, this data backs up their model and shows promise for followers who come under a toxic leader.

## C.    CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT

To create a conducive environment, the factors required are instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and a lack of checks and balances along with ineffective institutional organizations (Padilla et al., 2007). This is supported by Matos, O'Neill, and Lei (2018) who showed that hyper competitive work environments lead to toxic leadership due to the "win-or-die culture" that leads to employees seeking their own best interests no matter the cost which also leads to ingroups and outgroups allowing toxic leadership to come through. Saleem, Malik, and Malik (2021) found that, "organizational commitment appeared as an essential stress moderator and has successfully dampened the negative impact of abusive

supervision and narcissism on safety performance." They determined that an employee's affiliation with the organization lowered stress which lowered the feeling of instability which in turn would remove one of the three legs for toxic leadership proposed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007). Further, organizational affiliation (Saleem et al., 2021) is associated with effective institutional organizations (Padilla et al., 2007) which would create an environment that is more resilient to a toxic leader and lead to lowering the deteriorating effects of toxic leadership.

Toxic leadership, however, can reduce worker commitment: "it was found that toxic leadership factors all have statistically significant negative relationships with affective commitment. The current results indicate that the most significant impact of toxic leadership is made on the employees' feelings toward their organization—or affective commitment" (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020, p. 8). Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) found that toxic leaders working with colluding can overtake institutions and work around checks and balances to create a new destructive culture. This can happen through new policies or simply ignoring old policies because the leader is in a position of power. This in turn leads to what Paltu and Brouwers (2020) found where the affective commitment of workers toward the organization is lowered, thus leading to a more conducive environment creating a positive feedback loop that keeps the toxic leader in place.

At USNA, negative conducive environments can be created by Midshipmen leaders that do not have the proper checks and balances to guide them. This can be caused by Company Officers and Senior Enlisted Leaders who enable bad behavior or are not present to correct these issues. Midshipmen might try out a leadership style that negatively affects their people, but if there is no accountability from their peers or next level leadership then this can quickly devolve into a negative conducive environment where toxicity can fester.

## D.     ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Antithetical to the culture created by toxic leaders, ethical leaders within an organization develop a culture that creates trust and promotes and enhances creativity. Employees' differing views and values are respected by ethical leaders through the valuation of honesty and fairness in their relationships (Javed et al., 2018). This then

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changes the culture and boosts employee creativity (Javed et al., 2018). Organizational trust creates a blanket of psychological safety that encourages new ideas among the employees. The opposite is true where a lack of organizational trust exists. Employees are unwilling to risk their ideas being criticized so they do not share their ideas, which then lowers organizational productivity (Javed et al., 2018). Further, as they shield themselves from others, their organizational commitment deteriorates, which leads to less participation, and in turn influence others to contribute and participate less (Javed et al., 2018). When trust exists, communication increases because the employees feel more comfortable expressing their ideas without fear of reprisal.

> Because of their trustworthy trait, ethical leaders are willing to be transparent and communicate adequate information, which may diminish organizational dissemination of information discrepancy and boost trust. By empowering employees with information, ethical leaders affirm the value of the contribution of their employees. Employees in turn develop deeper commitments to organizational and departmental objectives by offering input and making decisions that affect the organization's success and prosperity. (Javed et al., 2018, p. 392)

Creativity shakes up the standards and norms in a positive way by bringing new ideas forward that inspires change. "Employees having trust in a leader tend to exhibit creative behavior. This is because creativity is a risk-taking behavior … before showing such risky behavior involving creativity, employees first see that whether they trust on leader, that leader will not punish them if they speak about new work means, via generating new ideas" (Javed et al., 2018, p. 399). This research demonstrates that organizations without toxic leadership have the environment, followers, and leaders all working together for positive outcomes. It is mutually reinforcing.

Midshipmen sometimes do not believe they receive that safety from their leadership. Midshipmen can be worried that their chain of command is looking to punish instead of teaching, leading, and holding someone accountable. They can be scared to come forward with issues due to fear of what their classmates might think of them or that the chain of command could issue an unfair punishment.

## E.     INCLUSIVENESS

Diversity and inclusion play a large role in the workplace so that employees feel a sense of belonging and trust in the organizational culture, the opposite of working under a toxic leader. Leader inclusiveness fosters a culture where all ideas will be heard free of any discrimination (Randel et al., 2016). Everyone in the workplace will be treated with dignity and respect, which leads to higher creativity and psychological safety. Inclusive leadership fosters increased psychological safety, which promotes employee creativity (Randel et al., 2016). "Although leader inclusiveness and psychological diversity climate are theoretically distinct, inclusive leaders could contribute positively to a psychological diversity climate through their emphasis on including individuals from a variety of backgrounds" (Randel et al., 2016, p. 217). Minorities, whether it is race or gender, will feel more compelled to contribute to the organization when they feel safe doing so. Individuals, particularly women and racial minorities, look to their leader and organization for indications that they are included prior to engaging in helping behaviors within the organization (Randel et al., 2016). As inclusiveness and diversity increases, research has shown that communication and self-reporting violations in the organization also increases.

> Our findings suggest that organizations with positive psychological diversity climates can obtain measurable benefits with respect to self-reported helping behavior by fostering work groups in which leaders act inclusively. Consistency between leader inclusiveness and psychological diversity climate can be facilitated with regular communication between organizational leaders and work group leaders regarding the importance of reinforcing a positive psychological diversity climate through work group leaders' actions. By training and encouraging work group leaders to ask for all members' input and encourage initiative on the part of all members, organizations can promote leader inclusiveness. More development of the concept of leader inclusiveness is needed, however, to help leaders understand how to become more inclusive. (Randel et al., 2016, p. 229)

Diversity and inclusion lead to a stronger organizational culture where the conducive environment for toxic leadership is diminished. With USNA being 29% females (USNA, n.d.a.), and women having challenges stemming from a male dominated culture (Mitchell, 1999) inclusiveness potentially impacts women more readily identifying with USNA. Leader inclusiveness and psychological diversity eliminate one leg on the toxic

triangle and foster a climate where everyone is encouraged to search for new ideas and share them freely.

## F.    CYNICISM

Cynicism breeds a conducive environment, which exacerbates the toxicity and erodes trust in the leadership. Cynicism engenders a lack of trust in the values of the system due to the belief that these values are thrown to the side to achieve organizational goals (Pitre, 2004). This then alienates employees and leads to a lower level of organizational commitment (Brandes, 1997). Once the cynicism sets in, then the employees will be wary of buying into the organization's goals and will distrust their leaders and peers. That distrust dissolves even further into disillusionment, and soon the last remaining relationship that existed between the organization and the employees is gone. These negative attitudes toward the organization on a large scale will lead to the organization becoming ineffective, which further creates a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007).

Cynicism is created by unrealistic expectations not being met and the ensuing disappointment. Leaders need to properly set expectations, meet those goals, and if not, show the organization how they can all grow from that failure. "[L]eaders in an organization must provide examples of behaviors for those in their charge rather than just providing oral guidance" (Pitre, 2004, p. 10). Midshipmen at USNA who feel this cynicism will take away from the peers and follower's growth and most likely will take these views with them to the fleet. As cynicism increases, so do conduct and honor offenses because many have lost trust and faith in the institution. As the number of conduct and honor offenses grow, this creates more cynicism because the other Midshipmen see offenders still graduate and go on to lead Sailors and Marines. A lack of investment and trust in the institution leads to members feeling disconnected, which creates further anger and cynicism (Eisinger, 2000). The United States Naval Academy develops Midshipman morally, mentally, and physically and if the Midshipmen do not trust their peers, leaders, and the institution, then an environment of cynicism and distrust forms, which detracts from the mission of developing moral leaders.

If you apply these ideas to midshipmen at the Academy, midshipmen who are cynical would not believe that the institution follows its own espoused principles, and would more likely believe that the institution is trying to deceive them rather than telling them the truth behind organizational decisions. More importantly, cynical midshipmen would also believe that the beliefs and principles espoused by the Academy are not worth supporting or fighting for. (Pitre, 2004, p. 13)

Cynicism also bars creativity and decision making. Employees are scared of making decisions because they are unsure of how their leaders and institutions will react if they make the wrong one. Midshipmen believe that as soon as they graduate from the USNA they will have to make important decisions, but their entire time spent at school they were prohibited from doing that.

Secretan (2000) postulated that cynical members of an organization learn to be careful and learn not to take risks. This reluctance to make decisions and take risks was reported by over half of the midshipmen interviewed. Some of the sentiments expressed by the midshipmen interviewed can be seen in the quote: I think we lose a lot of the chances to figure out what's important in life because we're not making any of those decisions and we don't have that responsibility. I think that's a major problem. Another midshipman interviewed went on to say: What's the incentive for being creative with the leadership of your subordinates…the administration will tell you what to do anyway. It becomes very easy to just do what you are told and stay under the radar [meaning the cognizance of the company officers and administration]. (Pitre, 2004, p. 28)

Not having expectations clearly delineated before attending the USNA leads Midshipmen to become cynical about rules they feel are unnecessary and burdensome.

Two different midshipmen said: You are almost forced to cover everything up here…One small infraction and the academy goes on a witch hunt to find and track down as many midshipmen involved as they can, and write you up for as many infractions as they can. If we had more freedom to make choices and some midshipmen ended up doing the wrong things, wouldn't it be better to let them make the mistakes and be held accountable for them prior to being commissioned instead of sheltering them so much they don't even know how to make the right choices? This freedom to govern their own personal choices is a major theme when asked to elaborate on how different this institution is in reality versus how they expected to be treated upon entering the Academy. This gap in expectation versus reality in how they should be treated as young, junior officers, and adults, is the most

common cause for the cynicism that is present in the Brigade of Midshipmen as evidenced by the focus groups. (Pitre, 2004, pp. 30–31)

This behavior lines up with conformer behavior laid out by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) and shows how a Midshipman toxic leader could exist and not have their behaviors reported. Leaders need to get in front of this issue to eliminate cynicism. If leaders present reasons for why certain rules exist, then they can abolish the environment that allows toxicity to spread from the cynicism.

An organization needs to build trust to encourage integrity, self-reporting, and psychological safety for anyone who comes forward to report infractions. Midshipmen are worried about turning in their peers for fear of reprisal.

> The midshipmen interviewed acknowledged that they themselves have been guilty of not following the guidelines set forth by the honor system and are not willing to report their classmates for infractions because of their unwillingness to be the "whistle blowers" in those situations. This unwillingness to correct deficiencies in their classmates' behaviors then further perpetuates the spread of cynicism throughout the brigade. Although they are disappointed in the behavior of other midshipmen, the stigma that goes along with turning in their classmates for moral violations comes at too high a cost in how they perceive peers will treat them afterwards. (Pitre, 2004, p. 32)

Many Midshipmen that came to the United States Naval Academy believed that they would be working and serving with the best and the brightest; however, as time went on, they realized that some put in the minimum just to graduate. "Along with the feelings that their peers' are a disappointment morally, over half of the midshipmen interviewed reported feeling as though their peers are always looking to do the minimum vice striving to be the best, which is something they expected when entering the Academy. This difference between expectations and reality of their peers' performance causes midshipmen to become cynical" (Pitre, 2004, p. 33). If an employee is promoted when his or her peers do not believe they deserve it, then that increases cynicism in the organization.

This cynicism has the potential to lead to a more conducive environment for toxic leadership. As shown by Eisinger (2000), cynicism indicates distrust in the organization and Brandes (1997) showed that cynicism alienates employees from their organization.

Pitre (2004) found that Midshipmen did not hold one another accountable due to a lack of trust in the administration leading to susceptible followers.

## G. SUMMARY

Toxic leadership has three components: a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment (Padilla et al., 2007). Toxic leaders are, "authoritarian narcissists who unpredictably engage in political behaviors and authoritarian supervision." (Schmidt & Hanges, 2009, p. 29). A toxic leader does not exist in a vacuum and as Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) modeled, susceptible followers and a conducive environment must be present. Susceptible followers are potentially created by the hierarchical nature of the military environment which creates a power differential that can be exploited by a toxic leader (Gallus et al., 2013). A conducive environment is likely created due to cynicism, which lowers organizational commitment (Brandes, 1997) leading to a conducive environment. Pitre (2004) found that cynicism exists at USNA, creating the possibility for a conducive environment. All three elements of the toxic leadership model proposed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) appear to exist at USNA.

## H. HYPOTHESIS

We hypothesize that the data collected at the United States Naval Academy will support the toxic leadership model proposed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) as well as (Gallus et al., 2013). Specifically, that when a subordinate ranks their leadership low due to toxic leader traits, they will have lower organizational commitment indicating a more conducive environment, and trust for their peers will be lower indicating that there are susceptible followers who are either conforming to the toxic leadership or colluding with the toxic leadership.

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# III.  DATA AND METHODS

The data used to test this hypothesis comes from a survey at the United States Naval Academy administered in fall of 2018. Our data analysis draws in large part and is modeled on analysis of this same data done by Shannon and Norton (unpublished). While we analyze different questions, our methodology is similar. The survey contained questions addressing organizational culture, ethical leadership, and trust. The survey was sent to the entire student body of 4,558, yielding n=269 responses for a response rate of 5.9%. Our independent variable was only in one of two survey versions distributed, and eight responses were dropped due to missing data, leaving n=121 responses in our analyses.

## A.  INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

The independent variable is the respondent's self-reported perception of selfishness in the respondent's first level leader. This is represented by the statement, "My first level leader: Puts the needs of others above his/her own self-interest." The question measures this using a Likert scale with a range of 1 (never) to 5 (always). This question best measures the level of narcissism in the first-level leader and which in turn is used as an indicator of a toxic leader (Schmidt & Hanges, 2009).

## B.  DEPENDENT VARIABLES

This thesis uses multiple questions to determine the existence of susceptible followers and a conducive environment. Susceptible followers are identified by analyzing respect among peers to identify conformers and competition to identify colluders (Padilla et al., 2007). As such, susceptible followers were operationalized as Midshipmen's respect for their peers and assessed with the statement, "I treat my fellow Midshipmen with respect even when they treat me with disrespect" on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This best determines unit civility, a mitigating factor for toxic leadership (Gallus et al., 2013), the lack of which would indicate subordinates have unmet needs requiring fulfillment from a toxic leader thus making them conformers under Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's model (2007).

A conducive environment is identified by analyzing the respondent's perception of identity with the Naval Academy. Using the same Likert scale, the respondent's self-reported identity is represented by the statement, "I identify strongly with the Naval Academy." This question measures organizational affiliation with the Naval Academy, which is an indicator of strong organizational policies that would reduce the effects of a toxic leader (Saleem et al., 2021).

## C.     CONTROL VARIABLES

Sex, race, mother's level of education, and class seniority are all utilized as control variables in this thesis. In Department of Defense data, sex is reported as male or female. Due to demographic homogeneity in the data set, race is represented as white or minority. Education of the mother is utilized to control for socioeconomic differences, as most midshipmen cannot accurately report their family income level, and is represented as some college or higher and high school or less education. The data for sex, race, and mother's level of education is summarized in Table 1. Class seniority is based on which year respondents are in at the Naval Academy, from Freshman=1 to Senior =4, and is summarized in Table 2.

Table 1.     Discrete Control Variables

| Control Variable | Category | Number of Respondents | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Total** | 121 | 100% |
| **Sex** | **Female** | 49 | 40.5% |
| | **Male** | 72 | 59.5% |
| **Race** | **Minority** | 53 | 43.8% |
| | **White** | 68 | 56.2% |
| **Mother's Education** | **High School or Less** | 18 | 14.9% |
| | **Some College or More** | 103 | 85.1% |

Table 2.    Continuous Control Variable

| Control Variable | Observations | Mean | Standard Deviation | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Seniority | 121 | 2.339 | 1.037 | 1 | 4 |

The sample is not fully representative of the student population. The Naval Academy is comprised of 29% females (USNA, n.d.a.), while we our respondents were comprised of 41% female. The Naval Academy is 38% minority (USNA, n.d.a.) which is consistent with the data collected.

## D.    ANALYSIS

Below, we used an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to analyze the data. The general form is

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon_i,$$

where Yi is the dependent variable, X1 represents the demographic control variables, and X2 is the independent variable.

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# IV. RESULTS

We used pairwise correlation between the independent and dependent variables to eliminate respondents that did not answer all the questions. The results are contained in Table 3.

Table 3.    Correlation

| | Toxic Leader | Susceptible Followers | Conducive Environment |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Toxic Leader** | 1.00 | | |
| **Susceptible Followers** | 0.12 | 1.00 | |
| **Conducive Environment** | 0.23 | -0.08 | 1.00 |

A moderate correlation is observed between the perceived existence of a toxic leader and a conducive environment, represented by the respondent's identification with the Naval Academy. A low correlation was observed between the perceived existence of a toxic leader and respect for peers. Additionally, no correlation was observed between the respondent's identification with the Naval Academy and respect for their peers.

## A.    SUSCEPTIBLE FOLLOWERS

An OLS analysis was performed on the dependent variable, susceptible followers, the independent variable, toxic leader, and was controlled for with the variables for sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and class seniority.

Table 4.    OLS Regression of Susceptible Followers with Toxic Leader

| Susceptible Followers | Unstandardized Coefficient | Standard Error | P Statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Toxic Leader | 0.13 | 0.10 | 0.18 |
| Sex | 0.02 | 0.19 | 0.93 |
| Race | 0.13 | 0.19 | 0.49 |
| Mother's Education | -0.21 | 0.27 | 0.44 |
| Class Year | -0.03 | 0.09 | 0.75 |
| Constant | 4.43 | 0.49 | 0.00 |

n=120 observations, Adjusted $R^2$ = -0.02

From the analysis, we can see there is no statistically significant correlation with the susceptible follower question with the controls and the independent variable for toxic leaders. The adjusted R-squared value is negligible. Additionally, we can deduce that susceptible followers as defined in this study do not exist strictly based on any demographic in this survey.

## B.    CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT

An OLS regression analysis was performed on the dependent variable, conducive environment, the independent variable, toxic leader, and was controlled for with the variables for sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and class seniority (see Table 5).

Table 5.    OLS Regression of Conducive Environment with Toxic Leader

| Conducive Environment | Unstandardized Coefficient | Standard Error | P Statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Toxic Leader | 0.26 | 0.11 | 0.02 |
| Sex | 0.04 | 0.22 | 0.85 |
| Race | -0.22 | 0.22 | 0.32 |
| Mother's Education | 0.27 | 0.31 | 0.38 |
| Class Year | -0.13 | 0.10 | 0.21 |
| Constant | 4.06 | 0.57 | 0.00 |

n=120 observations, Adjusted $R^2$ = 0.08

From the analysis, we can see there is a statistically significant moderate correlation between a conducive environment and a toxic leader when controlled for with the demographics we chose. The adjusted R-squared value is greater than our model in Table 4, indicating that just over 8% of the variance in conducive environment is represented by the independent and control variables. This shows that when there is a toxic leader in charge that it is more likely for a conducive environment to exist.

## C.    FULL MODEL

An OLS regression analysis was performed on the dependent variable, conducive environment, the independent variable, toxic leader and we treated the dependent variable susceptible followers as an independent variable to include it in the OLS analysis. This was controlled with the variables for sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and class seniority. In this OLS regression analysis, susceptible follower was used an independent variable to analyze how it factors into the relationship between a conducive environment and a toxic leader (Table 6).

Table 6.    OLS Regression of Conducive Environment with Toxic Leader
and Susceptible Followers

| Conducive Environment | Unstandardized Coefficient | Standard Error | P Statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Toxic Leader | 0.27 | 0.11 | 0.02 |
| Susceptible Followers | -0.12 | 0.11 | 0.26 |
| Sex | 0.04 | 0.22 | 0.85 |
| Race | -0.20 | 0.22 | 0.36 |
| Mother's Education | 0.25 | 0.31 | 0.43 |
| Class Year | -0.13 | 0.10 | 0.21 |
| Constant | 4.60 | 0.75 | 0.00 |

n=120 observations, Adjusted $R^2$ = 0.04

In this analysis, we still see a significant correlation between a conducive environment and toxic leader while also accounting for susceptible followers and the control variables. However, the Adjusted R-squared value decreases to about 0.04, demonstrating that adding the susceptible followers variable resulted in about half of the variance in conducive environment being accounted for as compared to Table 5. While the number of variables in this model coupled with the relatively small sample size may account for the reduction in Adjusted R-squared, it is important to note that the relationship between conducive environment and toxic leader remains moderate.

# V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## A. CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of the data showed that there was a moderate correlation between the existence of a toxic leader and a conducive environment. This correlation supports part of Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2007) toxic leadership model, that when a toxic leader exists there also exists a conducive environment, specifically that subordinates identify less strongly with the institution. The relationship between a conducive environment and a toxic leader was seen in several of the studies we analyzed, and it appears that this portion of the model holds true at the Naval Academy.

We did not see a correlation between susceptible follower and toxic leader or susceptible follower and conducive environment. The way we measured susceptible followers was based on the question, "I treat my fellow Midshipmen with respect even when they treat me with disrespect." We thought that this question would accurately reflect those who would be conformers (Padilla et al., 2007), due to its indication of unit civility (Gallus et al., 2013). If we were to collect new data to test the toxic leadership model proposed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007), we would write a new question to better address susceptible followers. Specifically, we would ask, "On a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree: If your first level leader was doing something unethical would you do anything to stop it?" This question would help identify both colluders and conformers directly rather than attempting to assess this indirectly via respect for others. Our hypothesis was partially correct, specifically, that when a subordinate ranks their leadership low due to toxic leader traits, they have lower organizational commitment indicating a more conducive environment. We did not find that trust for their peers was lower which did not indicate that there are susceptible followers who are conforming to the toxic leadership or colluding with the toxic leadership.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that the Naval Academy is a developmental institution, and that toxic leaders are difficult to identify until they are in a leadership position, the best way the Naval

Academy can attempt to reduce the effects of a toxic leader is to ensure that other elements of a conducive environment do not exist. This should lead to the results found in by Saleem, Malik, and Malik (2021) that when employees have a higher organizational commitment, they actively work together to mitigate the effects of the toxic leader. This is important in the Naval Academy context because all Midshipmen are given leadership positions at some point in their time at USNA, but there is not a method to identify toxic leaders prior to them assuming the leadership position. The best defense against toxic leadership is to ensure that Midshipmen have a high organizational commitment and identify with the Naval Academy.

As we explored earlier, cynicism leads to a conducive environment and cynicism comes about in large part from expectations not matching reality. One source of cynicism that Pitre (2004) found and that still exists at the Naval Academy today is the perceived disparities in the conduct system. We believe that the Naval Academy can reduce cynicism and thereby create a higher organizational commitment and thus a less conducive environment by more clearly and succinctly training on how the conduct system works, to include the average timeline, and the punishments awarded for various sanctions.

We recommend that a modified survey with the question change proposed above be performed in the future to provide further clarity on the relationship between toxic leadership, a conducive environment, and susceptible followers. Numerous aspects of the Naval Academy have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic and the updated data would give leaders the information needed to mitigate toxic leadership.

In addition to reducing cynicism, one method that can be used to mitigate toxic leadership is the 360-feedback model. This model has started to be implemented at USNA, where all members of a squad will provide feedback to others in the squad. As of now, there is no mandatory use of the feedback, such as debrief sessions with the Midshipman Chain of Command or with the Company Officer or Senior Enlisted Leader. The feedback is strictly reliant on the members of the squad to read and implement. There is also no feedback for Company Officers or Senior Enlisted Leaders.

Our recommendations are to elaborate on the current system and put in place a model for Company Officers and Senior Enlisted Leaders to receive feedback, as well. Midshipmen in squads should be required to perform debriefs with a Platoon Commander after receiving their 360-feedback. Platoon Commanders and higher should meet with their Company Officer or Senior Enlisted Leader. This will allow a person beyond their first-level leader to help analyze their feedback. During this meeting, the Midshipmen can set goals on improving negative feedback and continuing the positive feedback.

In a classroom setting, Midshipmen complete Student Opinion Forms (SOFs) for their teachers at the end of each semester. Similar forms should be used between Midshipmen and their Company Officer and Senior Enlisted Leader. The forms would be anonymous to provide psychological safety and be shared with the Battalion Officer to give more oversight and provide real-time feedback to act upon in the following semester. There should also be an installation of anonymous and locked feedback boxes outside of Company Officers' doors so Midshipmen can 1) provide feedback or proposals that do not go through their Midshipman Chain of Command, or 2) provide feedback they are scared to bring face-to-face with their Company Officer. These models will open up more lines of communication and result in more voices being heard, while also forcing people to actually confront their feedback to make positive change at USNA.

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