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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT

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Toxicity in Organizations: A Sample Study on the Perceived Toxicity in Turkish Academicians

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Abstract

The management styles of the organizations and therefore the managers are undoubtedly an important issue for employees. The behavior of both a high-level manager and top managers affects the sense, mood, and behavior of subordinates. For a long time, leadership research has concentrated too much on perfect, romantic, and “good” forms of leadership, but neglected the aggressive part: the toxic leadership. When the bad management is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is a bad manager. Poor management, bad leadership, or dark side of leadership is also referred to as the "toxic leadership" in the literature. In this context, in this study, the "Toxicity in Organizations", which includes malicious, condescending, and critical styles, was analyzed from various perspective. This study focusing specifically on the toxic leadership, and its characteristics, consists of two main parts. In the first part, literature review of toxic leadership in organizations was determined; in the second part a sample study on the perceived toxicity in Turkish academicians was performed. In addition, arguments, and suggestions were made to prevent toxicity.

Keywords: toxicity, leadership, organization, management

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Introduction

Today, organizations have gone through a rapid growth and restructuring process with the changes they have experienced in their internal and external environments. These rapid changes have become an important factor affecting employees' harmony with their managers, the quality of the leader-employee interaction, and their attitudes towards the job and organization. (Alshahrani, 2019, pp. 1-3). Managers fulfill the management or leadership duties by applying the functions of the management consisting of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling in stages (Lumen Boundless Management).

Therefore, undoubtedly, the attitudes and behaviors of managers are becoming more and more important in employee-manager relations. When the bad management is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is a bad manager. Poor management, bad leadership, or dark side of leadership, which is also referred to as the "toxic leadership" in the literature, has one or more of the characteristics such as excessively arrogant, prudish, insidious, deceitful, Machiavellian, narcissistic, toxic, destructive, authoritarian, tyrant, rude. These types of bad leadership often have certain things in common (Spain, 2016).

This study is basically twofold. Firstly, it begins by reviewing some of the definitions used in the literature in describing toxic leadership. It is a literature review providing an overview of this fashionable issue facing organizations with descriptions of what the problem is and how to address it. Secondly, it includes a sample survey on the perceived toxicity in Turkish academicians.

Literature Review

Toxic derives from Greek mythology: “toxicus” means “poison”. Singh, citing to several authors (Macklem, Tepper, Ashforth, Namie, Einarsen, Whicker) expresses that, despite the concept being a decade old and having gained increased attention in the popular press recently, toxic leadership has not been methodically studied. Bad or destructive leadership may be comprising six forms: tyrannical, abusive, bullying, destructive and concerned to this study, toxic. Toxicity is acutely sniping. Lynn Whicker was the first person who linked toxicity with leadership (Singh, 2017, p. 115). The terms “toxic leader”, “toxic manager”, “toxic culture”, and “toxic organization” appear with increasing frequency in business, leadership, and management literature. Analyst Gillian Flynn provides a particularly descriptive definition of a toxic manager; he is the “manager who bullies, threatens, yells. The manager whose mood swings determine the climate of the office on any given workday. Toxic leaders do not add value to the organizations they lead, even if the unit performs successfully on their watch. They do not create high levels of confidence that lead to unit cohesion and esprit de corps” (Reed, 2004, pp. 67-68).

Lipman-Blumen (2005) points out that toxic leaders are defined as those individuals whose leadership generates a serious and enduring negative, even poisonous, effect upon the individuals, families, organizations, populations, and societies exposed to their methods. The range of toxic leaders can be from mild and unintended toxic impacts powered possibly by leadership incompetence, to the absolute evil, with the toxic label incorporating corruption, harm, unethical conduct, and criminal behavior (p. 29). Moreover, according to Lipman-Blumen's model, toxic leadership happens when a leader has several destructive behaviors and shows certain dysfunctional personal characteristics. In other words, when leaders cause serious damages to people and organizations, they are toxic (Heppell, 2011, p. 246).

According to Appelbaum and Girard (2007), a toxic leader can be described as someone that is motivated by self-interest, has an apparent lack of concern, and negatively affects organizational climate. They often are destructive leaders who focus on visible short-term accomplishments and succeed by tearing others down. As a result, toxic leaders play a very important role in creating and upholding a toxic work environment (p. 18). Frost (2006) expressed that organizational toxicity is a situation, which reduces the morale, motivation, self-esteem, and diligence of the workers in an organization. In this respect, emotional pain experienced in institutions is called toxicity. Toxicity in the workplace is a regular incidence and an occupational danger. For that reason, the success of many projects, and the organization itself, depends on the success of “handlers,” the people (usually managers) whose interventions either lessen individuals’ pain from toxicity or remove it completely. Frost (2005) also stated that, when conditions are toxic, people spend more time concentrating on the pain and its sources, sometimes even obsessing about it than they do on their work. They disconnect from the workplace physically or psychologically, and they give far less than their best accomplishment in the organization. Heading off emotional toxins or mopping them up when they occur is an unrecognized feature of competent leadership. On the other hand, toxic leadership can also be expressed as “dark side of leadership”. In this respect,

leaders may exhibit the dark side of leadership due to a range of conditions. Kellerman (2004) claims that ineffective or unethical leadership is the cause. In this respect, Kellerman utilizes the definition of bad leadership. To this end, she provides two vantage points to think about building the definition of bad leadership or a bad leader. One is that bad leaders are ineffective. According to Kellerman, the ineffective leader, is simply one who does not create the changes desired by the followers. Two is that bad leaders are unethical. Kellerman defines the unethical leader as one who "...fails to distinguish between right and wrong".

Demirdağ (2018) citing to several authors, indicates some classifications, approaches, and theories on the toxicity. In this respect, the theoretical grounds of organizational toxicity include six different classifications. First one includes Fiedler's leader-member interaction. Based on this theory, the relationship between leaders and their followers defines the challenges, perceptions, and obligations within the working environments. Second one is Turner's self-classification. This approach recommends that self-classification is a process enabling individuals to find their own identities and act as members of groups. Third one is known as social identity which was developed by Tajfel and Turner. The theory indicates that that the society is formed hierarchically, and different social groups establish relations of power and status within such structure. Fourth one includes Freud's psychodynamics. According to this theory, leaders in organizations have a tendency to destroy those who have narcissistic behaviors as they may harm the organization by reducing the motivation and being jealous of the other workers. Fifth one includes Bandura's social learning theory. The theory recommends that when individuals are not punished due to their aggressive and unfriendly behaviors in their organizations, they may create toxicity within the environment. The last one is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In relation with organizational toxicity, based on Maslow's theory, a person may disagree with the existence of toxicity in an organization to protect his own relaxation zone and needs (p. 1320).

Organizational toxicity is an irritating process that causes serious and long-lasting damage to the organizations and its surroundings because of the repeated interaction of negative emotions and actions. Repetition of negative emotions is a condition that brings individual burden, makes someone feel insensitive and frightened for the probability of repetition of an unwanted situation (Frost, 2006). In this situation, it is very likely that the individual cannot get rid of his negative feelings in the working environment, is disappointed, feels despair, and frustration in case of experiencing similar negative situations. Disassociation is a situation when someone becomes isolated from his social circle or colleagues. Such an individual misses his willingness to interact with others, does not adapt to social conditions or want to come to work, isolates himself from the working environment and feels isolated. It is therefore important to examine the effects of organizational toxicity on the workers. About 80% of workers in negative work settings report health problems and due to toxic working conditions, one-third of workers have thought changing jobs within the last year and 14 percent have changed jobs in the last two years (Demirdağ, 2018, p. 1321).

Lord Acton once said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In the last twenty years, scandals like the Exxon downfall have shed light on that when individuals are placed in leadership positions, they do not always behave in an ethical fashion. Recent research on the destructive side of leadership has focused on the personality characteristics of faulty leaders (Towler, 2021).

From the discussions made so far, it emerges as an important finding that toxicity is a danger for both employees and organizations and that countermeasures must be taken to prevent it. In this context, for universities, which are also organizations, toxicity is also a serious problem. Although universities, in terms of their structure, functioning and personnel, have different aspects compared to other organizations, toxicity is also existing in these educational institutions. On the other hand, there are many negative aspects that contribute to the development of toxicity environment in universities. In this context, according to a study conducted by Yaman (2007), in the academic environment, communication channels between individuals are closed, an impolite language is spoken in daily life, work of the academics is not appreciated, sufficient support for academicians is not provided and academic promotions are not applied. For that reason, we believe that it will be very interesting to examine the intensity of the perception on toxicity occurring in the universities (pp. 150-154).

On the other hand, Kasalak and Aksu (2016) citing from Qian, Daniels and Ramaley, state that if the individual interests and professional ideals of the academicians in universities, surpass their professional values, it may lead to toxicity. Particularly, factors such as personal competition among faculty members, opposition for the success of the colleagues, status and role differences in the organization, the need to prove the power of those who have administrative puissance and having an organizational culture that tolerates negative organizational behaviors can lay the groundwork for organizational toxicity (p. 679). For the toxicity in universities, Farrington's (2010) viewpoints are also like other authors. According to her, the academy is a very isolated profession because it creates a culture "everyone is for herself/himself". In fact, there is a climate of tolerance however, being specialized in one's own field brings along a certain power for individuals. Especially with the academic titles taken, the administrative duties obtained in the units facilitate the development of conflicts by using the power of the academic staff negatively (pp.8-9).

Based on the literature review, this study hypothesizes toxic leadership as a discrete and specific form that does not comprise of simple mismanagement. The concept of toxic leadership can be interpreted as an exceptional set of leadership behaviors that effect the subordinate group in inevitable ways. Hence, the current literature implies need to examine perceived organizational toxicity, detected effects of toxicity, and levels of coping with toxicity in higher education establishments in Turkey. In fact, the existing study aims to determine whether an organization's toxicity have a potential risk to create *preventions, exclusions, jealousy, and lack of motivation* among academicians in universities.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to clarify the dimensions of the perceived organizational toxicity in Turkish academicians, perceived effects of toxicity, and coping with toxicity in their universities. Therefore, in the content of quantitative research methods, the study includes the following research questions on whether academicians in universities tend to:

- Prevent each other?
- Be jealous of each other?
- Motivate and not to motivate each other?
- Exclude each other?

As for the importance of the study, it is unique and highly practical for all individuals who are in management and for those who are called on to assume leadership roles assigned to deal with abnormality, organizational citizen behavior and toxicity in the organization. Moreover, there are few surveys on the toxicity in the Turkish universities. Therefore, this study will be very useful not only for the academicians across Turkey but also the authors who intend to conduct some research on the issue of toxicity. In this respect, it is thought that the studies on the organizational causes, effects and methods of combating toxicity will contribute to filling the gap in the relevant literature.

Methods

While working; articles, books and journals in the field were examined, and websites related to the subject were utilized. Quantitative research methods were used in survey section. In this context, to observe toxicity in the universities, it has been decided to make a survey research which is a commonly used method of collecting information about a population of interest.

Sample

In order to observe toxicity in the universities, a group of academicians were selected as sample. In this respect, a questionnaire has been sent to 300 academicians working in the faculties of the business and economics across Turkey and 165 academicians have answered the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, 4 main questions and more than 40 sub-questions related to main questions were asked. Within the scope of the main questions the following questions have been asked; "The tendency of academicians to prevent each other", "the tendency of academicians to be jealous of each other", "the tendency of academicians to motivate/not to motivate each other" and "the tendency of academicians to exclude each other".

Data Collection

The general form of a questionnaire is either structured or unstructured questionnaire. In structured questionnaires there are definite, specific, and pre-determined questions. Thus, a very structured questionnaire is one in which all questions and answers are as specific as possible. When these characteristics are not present in a questionnaire, it can be termed as unstructured. Structured questionnaires are simple to administer and relatively inexpensive to analyze (Mohapatra, 2018).

In relation with the subject study, the structured questionnaire was selected, and necessary answers were received from 165 academicians across Turkey. The following criteria was applied for both main questions and sub questions; "No-0 point", "Rarely-1 point", "Occasionally-2 points", "Sometimes-3 points", "Frequently -4 points" and "Always-5 points".

Findings

The data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 26.00. In the first step, the reliability test was conducted. In the second step, to evaluate the questionnaire, frequency analysis in SPSS program was conducted for "demographic features", "tendency of academicians to prevent each other", "tendency of academicians to be jealous of each other", "academicians' tendency not to motivate each other" and "tendency of academicians to exclude each other".

Reliability Test

Cronbach's alpha is the most common measure of internal consistency ("reliability"); that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. It is most commonly used when you have multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire like in this study. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), Cronbach's Alpha value is considered reliable when it is 0.70 and above ($0.70 \leq \alpha \leq 1$) (p. 54). Accordingly, the reliability of the scales used in the questionnaire is shown at Table 1, and the alpha coefficient for the 45 items is 0.954, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	165	100,0
	Excluded ^a	0	,0
	Total	165	100,0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,954	45

Demographic Features

As for the demographic characteristics of the individuals participating in the study, the relevant information is shown in Table 2. When the demographic characteristics of the individuals were examined, it was seen that the number of the men constituted the majority, the participants were generally over 35 years old, the numbers of the assistant professors, associate professors and full professors were more than the other academicians, and the number of the non-managerial positions were more than the managerial positions. The other observation is that, for the duration of employment in the profession, "11 years and over" constituted the majority.

Table 2. Frequency Analysis for the Demographic Features of the Participants

Variables		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	85	51,5	51,5	51,5
	Female	80	48,5	48,5	100,0
	Valid Total	165	100,0	100,0	
Age	25-34	64	38,8	38,8	38,8
	35 and over	101	61,2	61,2	100,0
	Valid Total	165	100,0	100,0	
Academic Title	Research assistant and lecturer	68	41,1	41,1	41,1
	Assistant professor, associate professor, and professor	97	58,9	58,9	100,0
	Valid Total	165	100,0	100,0	
Managerial Level	Managerial positions	44	26,7	26,7	26,7
	Non-managerial positions	121	73,3	73,3	100,0
	Valid Total	165	100,0	100,0	
Employment in the profession	0-10 years	77	46,7	46,7	46,7
	11 years and over	88	53,3	53,3	100,0
	Valid Total	165	100,0	100,0	

Tendency of Academicians to Prevent Each Other

In the context of toxicity, the first finding to be examined is the tendency of academicians to prevent each other. The information in Table 3 was obtained from the frequency analysis in SPSS program ("Analyze", "Descriptive Statistics" and "Frequency"). According to this information, academics have revealed the existence of a perception of prevention by saying "yes" at a rate of

95,8% with expressions of "rarely", "occasionally", "sometimes", "frequently" and "always". The rate of those who say "no" to this perception is very low (4,2%). The other observation is that most of the participants (61,2%) preferred the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes" for the tendency of academicians to prevent each other. The situation of this trend can be seen clearly in the table below.

Table 3. Academicians Tend to Prevent Each Other

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	7	4,2	4,2	4,2
	Rarely	19	11,5	11,5	15,8
	Occasionally	33	20,0	20,0	35,8
	Sometimes	49	29,7	29,7	65,5
	Frequently	45	27,3	27,3	92,7
	Always	12	7,3	7,3	100,0
	Total	165	100,0	100,0	

On the other hand, using the SPSS frequency analysis program, subtitles were also examined. In the context of the tendency for academicians to prevent each other, there was a sub finding, namely "academics are prevented due to the obstacles created by the administrative powers". This tendency got the highest rate (89,9%) in all sub findings of prevention.

Tendency of Academicians to Be Jealous of Each Other

For the toxicity, the second finding to be examined within the scope of the main findings is the tendency of academicians to be jealous of each other. The information in Table 4 was obtained from Frequency Analysis in the SPSS program. According to this information, academics have revealed the existence of a perception of jealousy by saying "yes" at a rate of 99,4% with expressions of "rarely", "occasionally", "sometimes", "frequently" and "always". The rate of those who say "no" to this perception is extremely low (0,6%). The other observation is that most of the participants (53%) preferred the expressions of "frequently" and "always" for the tendency of the jealousy. The situation of this trend can be seen clearly in the table below.

Table 4. Academicians Tend to Be Jealous of Each Other

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	1	,6	,6	,6
	Rarely	12	7,3	7,3	7,9
	Occasionally	21	12,7	12,7	20,6
	Sometimes	43	26,1	26,1	46,7
	Frequently	68	41,2	41,2	87,9
	Always	20	12,1	12,1	100,0
	Total	165	100,0	100,0	

On the other hand, using the SPSS frequency analysis program, subtitles were also examined. In the context of the tendency for academicians to be jealous of each other, there was a sub finding, namely "academicians are jealous of each other for reasons related to professional needs". This tendency got the highest rate (91,5%) in all sub findings of jealousy.

Academicians' Tendency Not to Motivate Each Other

In the context of toxicity in the universities, the third finding to be examined is the perception of academicians' tendency not to motivate each other. The information in Table 5 was obtained from the SPSS frequency analysis program. According to this information, academics have showed the existence of a perception of tendency not to motivate each other by saying "yes" at a rate of 96,7%

with expressions of "rarely", "occasionally", "sometimes", "frequently" and "always". The rate of those who say "no" to this perception is very low (7,3%). The other observation is that most of the participants (67,9%) preferred the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes" for the tendency not to motivate each other. The situation of this trend can be seen clearly in the table below.

Table 5. Academicians Tendency Not to Motivate Each Other

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	12	7,3	7,3	7,3
Rarely	29	17,6	17,6	24,8
Occasionally	35	21,2	21,2	46,1
Valid Sometimes	48	29,1	29,1	75,2
Frequently	35	21,2	21,2	96,4
Always	6	3,6	3,6	100,0
Total	165	100,0	100,0	

On the other hand, using the SPSS frequency analysis program, subtitles were also examined. In the context of the tendency for academicians not to motivate each other, there was a sub finding, namely "insufficient support for self-motivation". This tendency got the highest rate (86,1%) in all sub findings of motivation.

Tendency of Academicians to Exclude Each Other

In the context of toxicity, the fourth finding to be examined is the perception of academicians for tending to exclude each other. The information in Table 6 was obtained from the SPSS frequency analysis program. According to this information, academics have revealed the existence of a perception of exclusion by saying "yes" at a rate of 90,3% with expressions of "rarely", "occasionally", "sometimes", "frequently" and "always". The rate of those who say "no" to this perception is very low (9,7%). The other observation is that most of the participants (64,2%) preferred the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes" for the tendency of academicians to exclude each other. The situation of this trend can be seen clearly in the table below.

Table 6. Tendency of Academicians to Exclude Each Other

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	16	9,7	9,7	9,7
Rarely	22	13,3	13,3	23,0
Occasionally	31	18,8	18,8	41,8
Valid Sometimes	53	32,1	32,1	73,9
Frequently	34	20,6	20,6	94,5
Always	9	5,5	5,5	100,0
Total	165	100,0	100,0	

Evaluation

From the toxicity point of view, when the answers were examined, it emerges as an important main finding that the academicians are jealous of each other with the highest rate (99,4%) in all main findings. Furthermore, for jealousy, most of the participants preferred to use the expressions of "frequently" and "always". When the subtitles of the main finding of jealousy were examined, the finding of "academicians are jealous of each other for reasons related to professional needs" got the highest rate (91,5%) in all sub findings.

The second main finding is that the academicians do not motivate each other with a rate of 96,7% in all main findings. For the lack of the motivation, most of participants used the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes". In this context, "insufficient support for self-motivation" was an important sub finding with a rate of 86,1%.

The third important main finding in the study is that the academicians tend to prevent each other with rate of the 95,8% in all main findings. For the prevention, the academicians preferred to use the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes". Furthermore, while academics prevent each other, "obstacles created by academicians who have administrative power" come to the forefront with a rate of 89,9% as a sub finding.

The last main finding is the exclusion. This main finding has got a rate of 90,3% in all main findings. On the other hand, it is observed that most of the participants preferred the expressions of "rarely", "occasionally" and "sometimes" for the tendency of academicians to exclude each other. In the context of the exclusion, there has not been any substantial sub findings.

In accordance with the above findings, it can be said that all academicians agreed with main findings such as jealousy, lack of motivation, prevention, and exclusion. These findings give us very strong message for the existence of substantial toxicity. Furthermore, from the toxicity point of view, administrative power, professional needs, insufficient support for self-motivation come into prominence as substantial sub findings.

Conclusion

As all people, staffs, employees, workers, personnel, members in organizations are facing toxicity, the academicians have also been suffering from the toxicity in the academic community. The results of the existing quantitative study demonstrate that most of the academicians agree that they have experienced the toxic behaviors such as jealousy, lack of motivation, prevention, and exclusion in their sections. It emerges as the most important main finding with a percentage of 99,4% that academics are jealousy of each other.

In parallel with these findings, the current research claims that toxic behaviors such as professional needs, insufficient support for self-motivation, and administrative power are crucial findings. They are the causing factors that reveal the presence of toxicity.

Nevertheless, there are possible solutions to reduce, and sometimes even eliminate, toxicity in an organization. The most important factor, as with any abnormality/illness, is recognition. There are many warning signs that are available when trying to identify a toxin. For example, the staff turnover rate can be compared between each department. If one department has a greater turnover rate than all the others, then there might be a problem. It can be learned the judgment of the people working under the possible toxic individual. Another way is to establish a toxic culture with a unique strategy (Appelbaum & Girard, 2007, p. 21).

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