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The Lived Experience of Toxic Leadership in Irish Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose–The purpose of this paper is to reveal the lived experience of toxic leadership for a cohort of eleven individuals who work, or have worked, in the field of higher education in Ireland. Drawing on national and international literature, as well as the testimonies of a cohort of academic and administrative staff, the study considers the impact of this negative management style on these individuals as well as upon the organisation itself.

Design/methodology/approach–A total of eleven self-selected individuals (four males and seven females) were interviewed for this pilot study. Data from the semi-structured interviews were organised thematically and analysed with the support of the computer software package MAXQDA®.

Findings–The results show that the experience of toxic leadership was profound for the interviewees across a number of contexts. They reported adverse physical and psychological impacts as well as detailing the repercussions for their respective career trajectories as they endeavoured to safely navigate their often-hostile work environment. Human Resources (HR) departments within their respective institutions were the focus of considerable criticism by the interviewees who highlighted, what they saw as, the inherent contradiction/tension between the perceived roles and responsibilities of such departments in addressing or resolving interpersonal work-related disputes.

Originality/value–The findings expand on the extant scholarly literature on toxic leadership in higher education and, for the first time, offers a revealing insight on this phenomenon within the Irish context.

Keywords Toxic Leadership, Higher Education, Workplace Bullying, Stress, Human Resources (HR)

Paper type Research paper

> *Every worker has the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity"* (EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 31)

Introduction

The *right* referred to above places an explicit obligation on all employers to purposefully safeguard the well-being – both psychological and physical – of their employees. Article 31 of the *Charter of Fundamental Human Rights* (2000) requires the employer to ensure that they proactively and systematically foster a culture of respect for all employees, one which supports their safety and welfare in the workplace. Echoing these obligations, Irish workers are protected by the *Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005* which, as well as requiring employers to provide workers with a safe work environment, demands that they identify any potential hazards in the workplace, regularly assess such hazards and detail steps/strategies they will undertake to protect workers against them. However, despite these legislative protections, national and international research has consistently highlighted sectors where workplace interpersonal relations have been fraught, resulting in pernicious health consequences for employees affected (Boddy and Croft, 2016; Erickson *et al.*, 2015; Fahie, 2017). While all sectors have experienced challenges in this area, the public sector, and particularly the field of education, has emerged as having relatively high rates of workplace conflict, incivility and bullying (ESRI, 2007; Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2016), resulting in significant negative impacts on workers' health and well being (Fahie, 2013 and 2014). In this regard, higher education has been the specific focus of research for a number for years (Twale and DeLuca, 2008; Klein and Lester, 2013; Smyth, 2018) and, reflecting widespread anecdotal "evidence" and/or media commentary, working within the university sector can present particular relational/social challenges, particularly for young researchers or newly appointed, temporary/untenured academic or administrative staff (Waters, 2018; Scott, 2018).

This study analyses the experiences of eleven individuals who work, or have worked in, Irish universities or Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and who believe that they were adversely affected – personally and professionally – by, what they considered to be, the toxic leadership style of their manager/superior. While the impact of work-based negative interpersonal interaction can prove significant for both the individual and the organisation (Kline and Lewis, 2018), there has been little research on the role of leadership, particularly toxic leadership in developing and maintaining a negative workplace dynamic and the impact of this behaviour on

employees, particularly in Irish universities. This paper will address this lacuna in Irish research.

Toxic Leadership

Einarsen *et al.*, (2007, pp. 207) offer a seminal definition of the term "destructive leadership" as *"the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of his/her subordinates"*. They go on to argue that this aberrant "performance" of leadership manifests as tyrannical, derailed and, at times, contradictory behaviours on the part of those who hold positions of authority within an organisation. However, there remains an absence of definitional consensus on what, in practice, is meant by the term *Toxic Leadership* (Yavas, 2016). Scholars have conceptualised toxic leadership as "a leadership style distinguished by abusive behaviours used to bully or control others" (Berdahl, *et al*., 2018, pp 501), it is considered to be a type of "…leadership focused on maintaining position of control via toxic influence attempts…" (Milosevic *et al.*, 2019, pp. 2) which "results in negative but pervasive consequences that trickle down and create a stressful environment that adversely affects the subordinate's professional and personal life." (Dykes and Winn, 2019, pp.39). This style of leadership - also known as dark leadership (Otto *et al.*, 2018, for example), destructive leadership (Padilla *et al*., 2007; Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2018) or, simply, bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), and the behaviour it implies - impacts significantly on the individual on a psychological, emotional and economic level (see Webster *et al.*, 2016, for example), as well as upon the organisation itself – in the form of high staff turnover, increased cynicism, diminution of loyalty to organisation and counterproductive job behaviour by employees (MacLennan 2017; Burke 2017; Dobbs and Do, 2019). Indeed, toxic leadership has been seen as a considerable factor in the development and maintenance of workplace bullying dynamics within an organisation (Webster, 2016; Malik *et al.*, 2019). Resulting in stress (Zagross and Jamileh, 2016; Hadadian, and Zarei, 2016), anxiety and increased absences (Webster et al., 2014), as well as a sense of ennui or dehumanisation (Özer, *et al.*, 2017).

There are, according to Pelletier (2010), eight dimensions of toxic leadership (1) Attacks on followers' self-esteem - demeaning/marginalizing, or degrading employees (2) Lack of integrity - being deceptive, blaming others for leader's mistakes, going against his or her word, bending the rules to meet goals (3) Abusiveness - threatening employee's occupational and/or

personal security, (4) Social exclusion - excluding individuals from social functions (5) Divisiveness - ostracizing employees, telling an employee that he or she is not a team player (6) Promoting inequity - exhibiting favouritism (7) Threat to followers' security - using physical acts of aggression, forcing employees to endure hardship (8) Laissez-Faire style - failure to listen or act on employee concerns, disengagement, stifling dissent, criticizing employees when they speak out. Other researchers have focussed on the personality traits/characteristics of toxic leaders, positing, what they believe to be, their common qualitative personality or operational attributes. In this context, Lipman-Blumen (2005) - and echoed later by Hepbell (2011) - defined toxic leaders as "those individuals who by dint of their *destructive behaviours* and *dysfunctional personal qualities* generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organisations, communities and even entire societies they lead." (p.29). Lipman-Blumen (2011) sees absence of integrity, ambition, ego, arrogance, immorality, avarice and insensitivity as some of the key personal traits of the toxic leader. A later study by Yavas (2016) places egocentrism as a central component to toxic leadership as well as negative mood, unappreciation, instability and uncertainty, and autocratical management behaviour.

Nonetheless, the type and quality of *leadership* in organisations has also been put forward as a significant factor in shaping workplace cultures (Villanueva, 2017) and there is increasing awareness of the negative impact of *bad* leadership on workers and organisations (Kellerman, 2004; Wynne, 2017), particularly within higher education (Waters, 2018). Paradoxically, and underscoring the complexity of the issue itself, complaints of inappropriate or aggressive behaviours on the part of leaders are sometimes viewed by senior management as, an albeit spurious, success indicator, thus highlighting the perceived relationship between aggressive/macho leadership and organisational success (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Duffy and Sperry, 2012; Matos, 2018). Consequently, interpersonal incivility and toxic organizational cultures can be tolerated (or even fostered) by senior management who may apportion a spurious causal relationship between toxic behaviours by mangers and increased productivity/organizational success. Indeed, Erickson *et al.* (2015) argue that a destructive leader may have traits that the organisation considers productive or useful is other contexts. Unsurprisingly, leadership behaviour has been seen as a critical antecedent of bullying behaviours in the workplace (Woodrow and Guest, 2017). Indeed, tyrannical or authoritarian styles of leadership foster a culture of fear and may be seen as strong predictors of workplace tensions, disputes and bullying (Salin and Hoel, 2011). This is particularly the case in

organisations with a rigid hierarchical framework of power relations (Archer, 1999; Blase *et al.,* 2007; Beale and Hoel, 2011). Fortunately, organisations where more transformative leadership styles are adopted (see Dopson *et al.,* 2019) are less likely to develop workplace bullying dynamics that those where the supervisory mode is more laissez-faire, transactional or pernicious (Lewis, 2006; Dussault and Frenette, 2015).

Negative Workplace Behaviours

Dedicated research into negative workplace interaction and the impact such behaviours have upon employees and upon the organisation itself began in the 1990s in Scandinavia, the UK and Australia. These early studies of workplace incivility focussed on the *cause* and *effect* of this negative workplace interaction (see Leymann 1996, for example). However, more recent studies have consistently offered a increasingly nuanced understanding of such negative dynamics and underscore the complex dynamic framework of workplace (inter)relationships (Samnani and Singh, 2016; Einarsen *et al.,* 2017; McCormack *et al.,* 2018), as well as the contextual factors which shape the experience of bullying for employees and/or, indeed, bystanders (Escartin, 2016; Feijó *et al.,* 2019). Over the past twenty years, research into negative workplace behaviours has diversified and, increasingly, draws upon a variety of different scholarly, disciplinary and methodological traditions (Rai and Agarwal, 2016; Pheko, 2018).

A consistent thread within these studies suggests that incivility or aggression in the workplace is predicated on an imbalance of power (De Cieri *et al.,* 2019). This is particularly the case when there is a significant differential or disparity in the capacity to *exercise* power (Bricheno and Thornton, 2016) and would, on the face of it, seem to suggest that bullies must always hold positions of authority. However, as argued by theorists like Weber (1978) and Foucault (1994), the exercise of power is both multifaceted and omnidirectional i.e. not exclusively top-down. Indeed, Foucault (2012) maintains that the exercise of power is capillary-like in its dispersal; permeating and shaping every facet of one's experiential, sentient *selfhood*, contemporaneously shaping and being shaped by our experience of, and interaction with, the world. In this context, it must be acknowledged that those in nominal positions of power or leadership (school principals, for example) can themselves be the targets of negative behaviours (Fahie and Devine, 2014; Fahie, 2012 and 2015). However, leaders or managers may be reluctant to report such instances, as to do so may make them appear incompetent or weak (Jenkins, 2013). Newly appointed managers/leaders are particularly vulnerable to these

behaviours as existing employees may utilise their social connections (their network of established relationships) to isolate/undermine the manager or use their knowledge of local organisational procedure or policy to instigate vexatious complaints against their new manager (Birks *et al.*, 2014).

In Ireland, *The Irish Workplace Behaviour Study* (2018) surveyed 1,764 randomly selected households as well as three targeted organisations. 43% of respondents had experienced ill treatment in the workplace, of which unreasonable management was identified as having been experienced by 36.7% (Hodgins et al., 2018). 14% of respondents acknowledged that they had, in fact, perpetrated unreasonable management with 42.0% witnessing unreasonable management. In terms of employment sectors, unreasonable management was most likely to be experienced by those working in Health and Social Services (45.15%) as well as Financial Services (44.38%). 33.61% of those employed within Education experienced unreasonable management while just over 34% reported experiencing incivility and disrespect (Hodgins et al., 2018). A study by the ESRI (2018) reports increasing numbers of Irish workers who claim to have experienced stress in the workplace (from 8% in 2010 to 17% in 2018), job demands (time pressures, emotional demands, job demands as well as exposure to bullying/harassment were found to be contributory factors to this increased level. Indeed, emotional demands in the form of, for example, dealing with angry clients/customers or having to hide emotions while at work resulted in the individual being twenty-one times more likely to experience stress.

Thoroughgood *et al*. (2012) examine the role of followers in the toxic leadership triangle and suggest a taxonomy of vulnerable followers which they call the susceptible circle, querying why these individuals comply with the demands of the toxic leader without resistance. While acknowledging that that there is no such thing as the homogeneous follower, there is a pattern of behaviour amongst those who followed toxic leaders. The categorise these individual into to broad groups

- **Colluders** (Personal Gain) – 1. Opportunistic (reward orientated/align with the leader for personal or professional gain) and 2. Acolytes (“true believers” who share common values and goals with the leader)
- **Conformers** (Prone to obedience) – 3. Lost Souls - poor self esteem, need for security and acceptance, 4. Authoritarians - possess rigid, hierarchical beliefs that support, what they see as, the leaders' legitimate right to exert power over them and their inclination

to accept such influence unconditionally 5. Bystanders - passive and motivated primarily by fear

Cost of negative interactions in the workplace

Negative interaction between staff in general, and toxic leadership in particular, often results in poor outcomes across a variety of strata for any organisation, specifically in terms of poor productivity and high staff turnover (Pelletier, 2010). Boddy and Croft (2016) also note the dangers of toxic leadership to the organisation, citing reputational damage and loss of staff. They point to the long-term costs of toxic leadership to the organisation including reduced productivity, efficiency, brand equity, organizational culture and overall functionality and see toxic leadership as linked to a desire for hierarchical success within an organisation related to a primitive instinct for survival. McLennan (2017) highlights the cost to the organisation in terms of damaged reputation, lack productivity due to compromised loyalty and high turnover of staff. Staff were fearful of making complaints as to do so would compromise their own positions and tenure within the organisation.

Higher Education in Ireland

Drawing on a long tradition of scholars and scholarship, the Irish Higher Education system is comprised of eight universities, eleven institutes of technology, five colleges of education and a number of private/independent colleges. In addition, a number of other third-level institutions provide specialist education in art and design, medicine, business, rural development, theology, music and law (See Zhang *et al.*, 2017). With the obvious exception of the private/independent colleges, third-level educational establishments, though autonomous and self-governing, are substantially state-funded. The higher education sector takes in €2.3bn annually and spends €1.6bn every year on pay costs with 17,163 core staff in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (2015/2016) comprising of 9,139 academic and 8,024 non academic staff. Of these, 56% of academics are male and 44% female, while 35% of administrative/non-academic staff are male and 65% female (HEA, 2017).

Academic career structures in Ireland have undergone considerable change in the past thirty years, and are characterised today by considerable precarity, a high degree of competitiveness, and significant difficulties for early career academics and, indeed, administrative staff in obtaining permanent contracts (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015). In general, the demand for positions is higher than those on offer. Short-term and fixed-term contracts are common, and often provide little guarantee for future contracts, particularly for women (Ivancheva, Lynch

and Keating, 2019). Though the number of students enrolling in Irish universities has increased rapidly in this time period, upward mobility has become more difficult; lecturers have less time to devote to research, and are asked to devote more time to teaching responsibilities. Nonetheless, job security is generally quite high for those that obtain permanent contracts (see O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019 for example). About 80% of the academic staff in Ireland hold permanent tenured positions. All full-time academic staff are civil servants and tenured in the sense that they can not be fired without a serious cause.

Workplace Bullying in Academia – casualisation, promotion

Public sector employees across all sectors, are being subjected to increased surveillance, monitoring and evaluation, ostensibly to improve efficiency and accountability (Diefenbach, 2009; Fahie, 2013; Kline and Lewis, 2018). Such *managerialist* initiatives, often underpinned by neo-liberal paradigms, are viewed with suspicion and alarm by unions and workers alike; particularly when their implementation compromises employee's health/well-being (Mawdsley and Lewis, 2017), as well as their lived-experience of agency, voice and autonomy (Lewis, 2003; Lewis and Rayner, 2003). The very concept of managerialism is deeply embedded within seemingly logical or "*common sense*" discourses, thus undermining any capacity for even tentative resistance on the part of workers while, at the same time, affording HR departments a type of *illegitimate legitimacy* in respect of behaviours that might otherwise be considered inappropriate or unjust.

Claims of workplace bullying in academic institutions have been supported by international research for a number of years. Westhues (2004) was one of the first to highlight workplace bullying in universities and the impact of this behaviour on academics and universities alike. Twale and De Luca (2008) argue that the governance structures of universities/higher education institutions, coupled with traditional academic norms, support and foster the legitimisation of toxic behaviours in the academy. Echoing later work by Smyth (2017), they link this behaviour to hierarchical bureaucracies, increasing demands on employees combined with lack of clarity around roles/responsibilities, as well as increased scrutiny and performance monitoring. Keashley and Neuman (2013) point to the differences in prevalence rates of workplace bullying in academia and suggest that this may be due to definitional inconsistencies as well as differing methodological and conceptual paradigms. They maintain that it is difficult know if there is an increase in bullying behaviours or just and increase in reporting theses issues and, critically, point to the precarity of untenured staff and how they perceive interpersonal

interaction. This view is supported by Taylor (2013), with non-tenured staff more likely to exit the institution as a result of negative interpersonal interaction as well as being a significant factor in the type of behaviours experienced. Gardner (2012) argues that poor job satisfaction as well as unsupportive – and sometimes transient – leadership support can lead to high turnover of staff in academia. This is particularly the case, she maintains, for women (and even more so for women in STEM).

Workplace bullying in academic organisations impacts negatively on employee's physical resilience, their intellectual stimulation and psychological well-being (NgaleIlongo, 2015). A study of workplace bullying amongst university employees in the Czech Republic by Zabrodska and Kveton (2012) drew on a total sample size of 1533 participants and found that 13.6% could be classified as targets of bullying based upon an operational definition of weekly exposure to one negative act. In this study, the bullying was perpetrated, in most cases, by supervisors/leaders. Crucially, the issue of workplace incivility in academia is not confined to academic staff, Hollis (2015) details how 62% of administrators in a survey of higher education institutions in the United States reported witnessing or experiencing workplace bullying across 175 colleges resulting in employee disengagement for organisational goals and objectives.

In terms of organisational structures within colleges and universities, Rockett *et al.,* (2017) examined the understanding of HR professionals of the role of policies in Irish universities in respect of workplace bullying. Echoing O'Neill (2018), they argue that universities are particularly susceptible to workplace bullying given their decentralised organisational structures and explicit hierarchical power structures. The result of this behaviour is, they suggest, lower productivity, high turnover of staff, negative impact on individual's health and increased litigation. HR, the authors of this study maintain, play a real role in supporting university leaders in preventing interpersonal disputes and managing their swift resolution when they arise.

Methodology

Accessing, recruiting and retaining appropriate research sample populations for studies of sensitive topics can prove problematic, particularly when such issues include workplace bullying or work-related incivility (see Fahie and McGillicuddy, 2018). Having first been granted formal institutional ethical approval, eleven individuals were interviewed for this pilot study. These were drawn, at random, from a larger sample of forty-six persons who replied to a Twitter© post asking for interested parties to contact the Fahie about their experiences of,

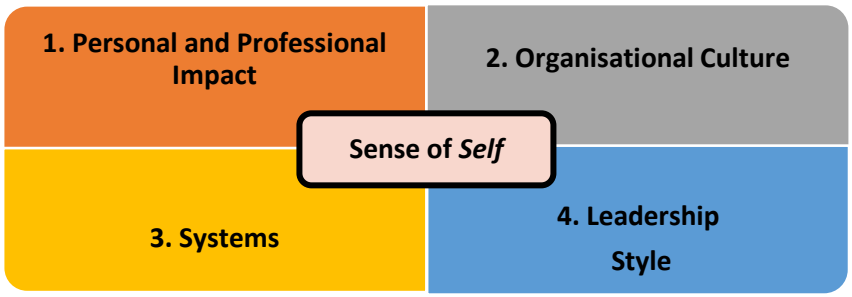
what they considered to be, toxic leadership in higher education. (The remaining thirty-five participants will be interviewed at a later date for a larger funded study.) This tweet had a reach of almost 67,000 individuals with 1,290 people actively engaging with the tweet (this included 226 retweets). The sample comprises of seven females and four males. All of the individuals work, or have worked, in Higher Education in Ireland and their experiences of toxic leadership occurred in Irish institutions.

Of the eleven interviewees, five work within universities across the republic, two work in colleges of education, two work in Institutes of Technology and two work within other (potentially identifiable) Higher Education Institutions. Three of the sample were administrators or post-graduate students employed by the university/college. One member of the sample was a PhD candidate at the time of the negative interactions and is now employed as an academic. The semi-structured interviews were informed by the literature and conducted in "safe" locations of the interviewees choosing and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Contemporaneous field noted were also taken by the Fahie. The code and retrieve software package MAXQDA was employed to assist in the organisation of emergent themes and the resulting thematic analysis of the narrative storytelling (Bourbonnais and Michaud, 2018). All names and identifying details were altered/deleted to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

Toxic Leadership - *The view from below?*

A considered analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a number of common, emergent themes. These have been organised into four determining experiential factors (see Fig. 1.) 1. Personal and Professional Impact, 2. Organisational Culture, 3. Systems and 4. Leadership Style. Each of these themes, reflecting a Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969), shaped the individual's sense of self as well as their understanding of their place in the world and will now be considered in turn.

Fig. 1 *Emergent Themes*



1. Personal and Professional Impact

Interviewees for this study detailed, what they considered to be, the physical, psychological and professional consequences or impact of toxic leadership. These included vomiting, sleeplessness, headaches, stomach cramps, skin rashes, elevated blood pressure as well as anxiety, stress and medically diagnosed burnout. Eight of the interviewees had received medical treatment for work-related stress. Three were on long-term related medication due to their ill health. *"I often don't sleep on a Sunday night. I can't get work out of my head. Rehearsing what I will say to* (her boss) *and beating myself up over what I should have said"* (Kate). Tearfulness and an overwhelming sense of fear and frustration was also articulated by several of the interviewees; fear that they would be targeted again and frustration that they seem unable to address the situation successfully.

Three of the interviewees had permanently exited their workplaces and one had taken early retirement. The others remained in their places of employment but were, some argued, in constant state of hypervigilism. Their experience of toxic leadership had diminished their sense of loyalty to the organisation as well as their commitment to their work in general *"I just go through the motions. Bare minimum stuff. I hate this place. I'll be gone as soon as I can retire"* (Alan). Interestingly, two academics articulated a belief that they worked harder and more productively because of the negative atmosphere; that they sought solace and respite in their work - isolating themselves against the behaviour by engaging in research collaborations outside of their respective schools. Others spoke about an extrinsic impetus towards increased diligence and productivity underpinned by a sense of fear. They spoke about their belief that their positions were precarious or that their leaders would not support (or indeed actively undermine) their career trajectories. To dilute this, they worked harder to be seen as "excellent" at their jobs. However, they were quick to point out the human and physical cost of this desperate motivation towards efficiency. Indeed, eight of the interviewees spoke of their desire to leave their workplace and acknowledged the economic impact this would have upon them and their loved ones *"I have a fantasy that I'll just tell him to 'Shove it!'. Walk out. Fuck the mortgage…*(laughs)" (Denis).

Interviewees also spoke of the impact of this behaviour on colleagues and bystanders. A level of frustration was articulated in respect of the paucity of support from colleagues who witnessed the behaviour or acknowledged their awareness of the negative dynamic. Most of the interviewees believe that this was due to fear that they would be targeted themselves or that

to intervene would impact negatively on their own careers. This resulted in interviewees feeling increasingly isolated and vulnerable. *"I know some* (colleagues) *are afraid of him. But others just want to stay on his good side or think it* (the negative behaviours) *is not their business to get involved. So, they do nothing"* (Colm).

2. Organisational Culture

The culture within an organisation is considered critical to the quality of the work/life experience of those employed therein (Pheko *et al.*, 2017). How any organisation, in this case, a college or university, operates and demonstrates its esteem/regard towards its staff and students is of critical importance to how they feel about working or studying in that same institution (Smyth, 2018). Interviewees for this study spoke about the deeply embedded nature of negative interpersonal interaction in their respective places of employment and how successive leaders seemed incapable or unwilling to address this toxicity successfully across a number of years. Incivility, interpersonal aggression and bullying behaviours were, they argued, *inscribed* within the organisational DNA of their places of work and the management style of their respective leaders served to perpetuate or, in some cases, exacerbate this negativity.

For eight of the interviewees, there was an historical culture of tension, bullying and/or abuse in their workplace. It these cases, the person in a position of leadership was an active party to the negative interpersonal interaction over many years and was, as one interviewee called it "…*the keeper of the flame*" (Alan). Interviewees argued that poor interpersonal interaction was embedded in the culture and that "…*they don't know how to behave any other way*" (Ellen). Historical slights and territorial disputes remain unresolved and "live", and are underpinned by a reluctance, unwillingness or an inability to address and resolve such tensions. To do so could result in a very public humiliation or loss-of-face *"They've all been fighting like this for years. When* (the head) *became boss, he waited a while until he started getting his own back on all those who has pissed him off over the years…it's incredible"* (Denis). This revenge strategy involved stalling of promotions, undermining and ridiculing colleagues both publicly and privately as well as assigning them, what they considered to be, unrealistic/unfair workloads.

For the remaining three interviewees, a new culture that has been fostered by the toxic leader which destroyed the previous collegial atmosphere in their respective schools. *"I really liked working here"* (Barry). Interviews spoke wistfully about how staff meetings were constructive and supportive and how personal life events were celebrated with a genuine joy by members

of staff. "*We used to joke about the extra weight you put on when you joined* (the staff) *from all the cakes and biscuits people brought in*" (Ina). The altered culture had fostered enmity, mistrust and undermined previously positive relationships. Staff were now reluctant to engage, and found staff meetings to be stressful and confrontational. *"It's so sad how things have changed. I know it sounds silly, but we got on with each other. We really did. Now it's like we're all enemies. It's all cliques"* (Gemma). Interviewees also argued that, once established, a toxic culture is very difficult to address and overcome. *"I don't know how we can change it (the culture). Its like you expect aggression now, you're surprised if people are nice or kind or…human*" (Jean)

3. Systems

Interviewees spoke of the power distance between their leaders and themselves, this power differential meant that they felt less able to complain or to fight back. To do so would impact on their career trajectory and would be, they felt, futile. *"If we make a formal complaint, then that's the end of me getting anywhere in this place* (her university)" (Jean). The corporatized education system, it was argued, supported this inequity and disenfranchisement, particularly for those on temporary, post-doctoral or early career contracts. While structures existed within the colleges to initiate formal complaint against individuals, including leaders, interviewees were reluctant to do so due to the absence of any embedded or explicit protections for them once the identity of the complainant was made public. *"If you make a complaint, nothing will happen and you'll be left on your own…still working under the person who you complained about in the first place."* (Gemma). Interviewees also felt that the promotional systems within the universities were fundamentally flawed and seemed to reward those who had little evidence of leadership but had been successful in attracting grants or publishing papers – often solitary endeavours. The absence of clear management pathways or whistle-blower supports resulted in interviewees being loath to formally articulate their frustration or upset at the behaviour of those in positions of authority.

The issue of how Human Resources (HR) departments within the HEIs responded to the toxic leadership and/or formal complaint made against individuals were raised by almost all of the interviewees. Of all issues, this was one which provoked the highest degree of distress and frustration. HR departments were seen by interviewees as proactive agents of the university and, despite the diverse experiences and roles of the interviewees, were considered to be unsupportive and, at times, overtly hostile towards the individual employee who was involved

in the work-related interpersonal dispute. Indeed, interviewees went so far as to state that individuals should avoid direct contact with HR as any interaction would, they feared, have negative repercussions for them "*Keep away from HR. 'Everything you say to them can and will be used by (their leader) in a court of law'* (laughs)" (Hillary). Tellingly HR were seen by some as *"collaborators"* (Gemma), siding with the head of school/leaders in work related disputes. As Frances adds *"HR work for the university. Not for us. They protect the university".*

4. Leadership Style

"If you are a real leader, you behave in a way that supports everyone and cares about everyone and you are like a role model for how people should behave. You don't abuse your power" (Kate)

The notion of leadership *style* provokes a level of rueful mirth amongst many of the interviewees. Nine of the interviewees argued strongly that the styles of leadership they experienced was either *"morally bankrupt"* (Sean) or was predicated on overcompensation for professional incompetence *"She's really useless. Has made so many mistakes. Some of them cost loads* (of money). *But we never hear of any of it again. It's like none of it ever happened. Any questions then are shot down. She can be really nasty."* (Hilary). One interviewee, Kate, called it a *"pastiche"* and detailed how her supervisor would 'parrot' current management-speak with a high degree of authority and fluency. However, there was, in all cases, a noxious dissonance between the public rhetoric and the lived practice. *"If you heard him talk, you'd swear he was the best boss ever! He has all the lingo! That's his sting. From the outside he's fantastic but we all have a very different experience of him...in reality, like"* (Ina)

The notion of abuse of (leadership) power was detailed by all of the interviewees. Each detailed example of, what they considered to be, instances where their manager/head of school/department deliberately abused their positions to exercise their power in a dictatorial, aggressive or offensive manner. *"He would use staff meetings to publicly humiliate and attack people. Everyone just sits there. We're all afraid if we say anything, we'll be next"* (Elle). Their own inability to seek redress or respond to the abuse in an appropriate manner was a considerable source of distress for the interviewees, compounding their negative experience by adding a layer of self loathing at their own impotence. Denis argued *"As a man, I feel really ashamed of myself. It's like I'm a coward. I AM a coward. I don't know, should I punch him…or kick the shit out of him...I don't know".* Furthermore, the relative autonomy of the leader was also an issue raised by four of the interviewees. These individuals maintained that their respective leaders (in all of these cases the leaders were Heads of School/Departments) seemed

to act with a high degree of autonomy or, indeed, impunity. The absence of any overt monitoring of the work of the leader was a cause of concern for these employees and undermined their own sense of agency and independence. *"She can do what she likes. Nobody checks. No-one cares so long as there isn't any bad publicity…once everything is kept quiet." (Jean)*

Discussion

The negative impact of toxic leadership on employees, bystanders and the organisation itself is considerable (Pelletier, 2010; Boddy and Croft, 2016; McLennan, 2017). Echoing this previous research, the data from this study reveal a number of key issues to consider. Firstly, there is a significant cost of negative workplace interaction and the "fallout" from toxic leadership can prove considerable for the individual employee. Mirroring Erikson (2015) and Webster *et al.,* (2016), for example, interviewees detailed the physical, psychological and professional cost of the negative interaction/incivility with their superiors and how this, in turn, shapes their career aspirations and trajectory. The distress and discontent recounted by interviewees, as well as the clear articulation of the career-compromising, self-preservation strategies employed as mitigating/moderating techniques, has implications for their loyalty to the organisation, engagement with their work, collegiality and productivity (Boddy and Croft, 2016). The resulting fear-induced balkanisation of staff into sub-cultural/counter-cultural silos is anathema to the fostering of healthy workplace relationship and has obvious implications for personal well-being as well as for productivity within departments/schools. In addition, given the relatively small scale of the higher education sector (particularly in a country the size of Ireland), the institution will quickly experience a loss of reputation resulting, for example, in significant difficulties in attracting and retaining staff. Given the increasing precarity for those working in the academy (Ivancheva *et al*., 2019), these issues are particularly pertinent for those employees (both academic and administrative) on temporary or part-time contracts who often feel impotent to challenge unjust treatment without the support of more (powerful) senior colleagues. Such structural and systemic inequities within Higher Education must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Human Resources (HR) departments have a responsibility to ensue that all staff are treated with dignity and respect in the workplace (Rockett *et al.,* 2017). However, data consistently revealed a palpable mistrust of, and sense of disengagement from, institutional HR department *personnel*; highlighting an inherent structural tension between the dual (but seemingly unequal)

responsibilities of HR to simultaneously safeguard and represent both the staff member and the organisation itself in any dispute. In addition, it is notable that the mechanisms/policies/procedures designed to deal with interpersonal disputes were seen by many of the interviewees as lacking in transparency, unfair and/or biased. This clearly points to a paradoxical incongruity between the public/official institutional rhetoric of supportive, collegial performativity (as manifested in well-being initiatives and community engagement) and the attitude of employees towards these departments.

This underscores a need for a transparent *warning system* in each institution whereby HR would routinely monitor each department/school/section for "red flags" (a disproportionate number of absences/sick leave due to stress, relatively high turn-over of staff, difficulty in recruiting new staff, large volume of complaints from staff members). Critically, there would be a clear obligation on one individual to respond to these as part of the institution's legal and moral duty of care towards employees. This individual need not necessarily be a member of the HR department itself, and would act as an independent advocate liaising between staff and college management. All staff would have to be made aware of these procedures and reminded on a regular basis. To support this liaison person, each department/school/office would be obliged to conduct, and publish, a standard culture audit across a specified number of years. Coupled with regular upward evaluation of leaders, as well as training and support for those in positions of leadership, such structural reforms would assist the institution in preventing the development of toxic leadership dynamics.

Limitations

The sample size for this study is small and this has obvious implications for generalisability. However, this is a pilot study and the response to the Twitter call for participants (detailed above) indicates that the issue warrants further in-depth study. In this regard, the intention is to secure funding for a comprehensive study across a number of institutions on this topic with a variety of research methodologies employed.

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