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# An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Former US Army Personnel and their Perspectives on Toxic Leadership

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# An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Former US Army Personnel and their Perspectives on Toxic Leadership

## **Abstract**

Toxic leadership is defined in the Army as a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that adversely affect others (US Army, 2012). Toxic leadership is currently a phenomenon that is problematic for the U.S. Army and its consequences it has on soldier morale (Ellie, 2012). Moreover, the US Army's recognition of this problem and movement to eradicate it has been a slow process with limited resolutions. The present research yields participant agreement on the negative impact that toxic leadership has on soldier morale. In order to determine the impact that toxic leadership has on the morale of its personnel, a series of interviews involving five retired army personnel was carried out. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted to analyze their perspectives to explore the effects of toxic leadership on each of them, personally. Specifically, the study found that the impact of toxic leadership resulted in decreased morale, suicidal tendencies, and army personnel ending their careers early due to their experience in toxic command climates. Additionally, the study found that the U.S. Army is not eradicating the problem at an effective or an efficient pace. The information gathered will assist the U.S. Army in altering their views on toxic leadership and enforcing an immediate change on how they can address this problem in the future.

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Jennifer Schulman

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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of  
Former US Army Personnel and their Perspectives on Toxic Leadership

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
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Supervised by

Dr. Janice Girardi

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Dr. Jennifer Schulman

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education  
St. John Fisher College

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May 2015

## **Dedication**

This journey would not have been possible without the support, direction, and inspiration of many people. I would like to thank Dr. Rachel Albone-Bushnell for her support throughout this journey. I would also like to thank my big Brother, Dr. David Asbery, for inspiring me to pursue the degree of Executive Leadership and to trust the process. Then, a special thanks goes to my mother and sister for their support and their prayers when I felt I did not have a prayer at all. Next, I want to give a heartfelt thank-you to Dr. Janice Girardi as well as to my Co-Chair Dr. Jennifer Schulman. Thank you both for your guidance and for being patient with me throughout this journey. Finally, I want to thank Mr. Sean Waters, my mentor at my current job, as well as Dr. George Reed, Master Sergeant Jeff Fenlason, and Dr. Dave Matsuda for all of your insight and knowledge on the subject of toxic leadership. Lastly, I dedicate this study to my beloved United States Army where I was able to live my childhood dream of being an Army leader.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Joseph Asbery is a native New Yorker who grew up in Manhattan and later in the Bronx. In 1990, Mr. Asbery joined the Army National Guard and continued his education by attending John Jay College of criminal justice. Upon graduation in 1993 with a Bachelor's Degree in Police Science, Mr. Asbery received his commission into the Regular Army as a Logistics Officer. During the course of Mr. Asbery's career in the Army, he served in numerous leadership and primary staff positions. This includes Company Commander, Battalion Logistics Officer, Ground Operations Officer, Deputy Chief of Planning and Brigade level Training Officer (S3). Mr. Asbery retired from the Army at the rank of Major in 2010 and now works for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), acting as a Senior Watch Officer for DHS-FEMA Region II. While employed at FEMA Mr. Asbery completed the Emergency Disaster Management graduate program at the Metropolitan College of New York, where he received a Master's Degree in Public Administration in 2012. Mr. Asbery pursued his doctoral studies at St. John Fisher College in Executive Leadership. His dissertation research was an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of former U.S. Army personnel and their perspectives on toxic leadership. Under the mentorship and guidance of Dr. Janice Girardi, he received his Ed.D. degree in 2015.

## **Abstract**

Toxic leadership is defined in the Army as a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that adversely affect others (US Army, 2012). Toxic leadership is currently a phenomenon that is problematic for the U.S. Army and its consequences it has on soldier morale (Ellie, 2012). Moreover, the US Army's recognition of this problem and movement to eradicate it has been a slow process with limited resolutions. The present research yields participant agreement on the negative impact that toxic leadership has on soldier morale. In order to determine the impact that toxic leadership has on the morale of its personnel, a series of interviews involving five retired army personnel was carried out. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted to analyze their perspectives to explore the effects of toxic leadership on each of them, personally. Specifically, the study found that the impact of toxic leadership resulted in decreased morale, suicidal tendencies, and army personnel ending their careers early due to their experience in toxic command climates. Additionally, the study found that the U.S. Army is not eradicating the problem at an effective or an efficient pace. The information gathered will assist the U.S. Army in altering their views on toxic leadership and enforcing an immediate change on how they can address this problem in the future.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

U.S. Army's Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 (2012) states that negative leadership can leave people and organizations in a worse condition than when the relationship started. Additionally, ADP states toxic leadership is one form of negative leadership in which these leaders have self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that adversely affect others. Steele (2011) maintains that damage caused by toxic leaders in the U.S. Army is unmistakable and emphasizes toxic leadership effects soldiers' well-being, retention, and it can lead to mutiny and even death (2011). Perkins (2014) echoes the same results by stating that the U.S. Army needs to address toxic leadership since it could have a direct impact on the lives of soldiers.

**Toxic leaders.** Whicker (1996) coined the phrase *toxic leader* to describe a leader in various fields that has dysfunctional qualities that can possibly cause significant harm to people. Whicker stressed that toxic leaders create varying degrees of damage. Furthermore, she describes toxic leaders as "maladjusted, malcontent, malevolent, and, at times, malicious" (p. 11). Lipman-Blumen (2006) stated that toxic leaders cause serious harm to their organizations and their followers. She reminded us that:

Destructive behaviors of toxic leaders include leaving their followers worse off than they found them, sometimes eliminating by deliberately undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing

many of their own people, including members of their entourage, as well as their official opponents (p. 19)

Additionally, Goldman (2006) also suggested that toxic leadership is damaging, stressful, and a dysfunctional action of supervision that can spread among members of the workforce.

**Leaders and leadership as defined by the Army.** Williams (2005) wrote that solid leadership is the foundation of an effective military. In addition, the ADP (2012) defines an Army leader as someone who by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility inspires; and influences people to accomplish organizational goals. Moreover, Army leaders inspire people both inside and outside the chain of command to pursue actions, think critically, and form decisions for the good of the Army.

**Toxic leadership in the Army.** Reed (2004) stated that the Army needs to assess leaders with destructive styles to prevent the rise of destructive leadership. The researcher notes toxic leaders represent an unnecessary stress, negative values, and bleakness for subordinates. Reed emphasizes that toxic leaders are poisonous to the good of an organization. In addition, ADP (2012) defines toxic leadership as a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. Dr. Denise Williams conducted a study in 2005 that identifies 18 types of negative leaders and the destructive behaviors associated with each type. Additionally, Matsuda (2010) conducted a study that reveals a possible relationship between toxic leaders and its link to suicides in the Army. Matsuda states that toxic leadership had a direct effect on Army morale (2010).

**Morale.** Hightower, (2004) described military morale as that quality that holds the soldier and their unit to a high level of performance despite any other influence. This researcher went on to say that morale helps retain quality personnel within the ranks, which assists in the overall effectiveness of the organization. According to the Army Doctrine Reference Publication [ADRP] (2012) morale is the degree to which soldiers feel positive toward their unit. Reed (2004) indicated that destructive behavior is one problem on the part of toxic leaders and another is the effect toxic leaders have on the morale of troops. Matsuda (2010) also supported this linkage of toxic leadership and morale with suicide in the Army.

### **Problem Statement**

According to the Army, leadership is integral to the U.S. Army by meeting challenges of increasingly complex environments (Mann, 2014). Toxic leaders affect an organization's culture negatively by engaging in damaging behaviors that compromise their own character and the values of the Army formation in which they serve (Aubrey, 2012). Therefore, the Army should be concerned with toxic leadership because of the consequences caused by this negative leadership style (Steele, 2011). These consequences include lack of trust; reduced operational effectiveness, commitment and retention; breakdowns in communication; and diminished follower well-being (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). Studies have been conducted that link toxic leadership to the health and well-being of the troops (Matsuda, 2010; Wilson, 2014). While the Army has measures in place to address the issue of toxic leadership, they have not eradicated the situation (Ulmer, 2012). This study serves to increase the knowledge base about the

impact of toxic leadership on troops' morale and the measures the Army is taking to address this issue.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

For the purpose of this study, three theories will drive the research. The first is Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) authoritarian theory as it relates to authoritarian leadership. The second is Freud's (1914) theory of narcissism, and the third is the work of MacGregor (1960) as it relates to Theory X and Theory Y.

Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) developed authoritarian personality theory to explain the authoritarian atmosphere in Nazi Germany that led to the Holocaust. Additionally, the researchers define authoritarianism as unquestioning obedience to authority. Lipman-Blumen (2006) conducted a similar study to that of Adorno et al. (1950) that focused mainly on the authoritarian personality type. In particular, she noted that individuals with authoritarian personalities are people who are likely to both obey authority and to enjoy exercising it over others. Lipman-Blumen clearly states the correlation between authoritarian behaviors and certain types of toxic leadership.

The second theory used in this study is narcissism theory (Freud, 1914). Freud provisionally defines a narcissist as a person who believes they are the center of attention. He states that those with narcissistic personalities need gratification from vanity and self-importance and/or have a selfish admiration of their own attributes. In addition, Schmidt (2008) wrote that the U.S. Army defines a narcissist as an individual with personal inadequacies, selfishness, and a desire to create and maintain an environment that promotes one's self interest above all others. Moreover, Doty and Fenlason (2013)

indicate that narcissistic leaders' total focus is on their achievements, livelihood, and self-image.

The third theory used in this study is that of *Theory X and Theory Y*. McGregor (1960) defined Theory X as the belief held by many managers that most employees are inherently lazy and derive little or no satisfaction from their jobs, so that that they must be motivated by fear; an authoritarian management style is therefore required to ensure that workers will meet their job objectives. By contrast, McGregor defines Theory Y as the view held by other managers that individual subordinates can be self-motivated and exercise self-control, whether because of enjoyment of the work, ambition, or other positive motivation. Theory Y managers believe that the right supportive work atmosphere will help workers be motivated to move beyond minimal compliance in their roles. Perhaps more importantly, Goldman (2006) states that Theory X managers share important characteristics associated with toxic leaders.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to examine toxic leadership through the experiences of five former Army personnel in order to understand, from their perspective; the impact toxic leaders have had on their morale. Schmidt, (2014) indicates that by advancing knowledge of toxic leadership, there might be increased opportunity to decrease its prevalence and reduce its destructive impact. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the damage toxic leaders can cause and how the Army is addressing this phenomenon. The study seeks to add knowledge to Army leadership to affect positively the issue of toxic leadership.

## **Research Questions**

The following two research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1. What impacts does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers?
2. What is the Army doing to identify and eradicate toxic leadership from its ranks?

## **Significance of the Study**

Toxic leaders represent a daily test that can result in unnecessary organizational stress, bad values, and impossibility (Reed, 2004). Through the analysis of first-hand accounts of toxic leadership and perceptions of the impact such leaders have had on unit and individual morale, this study will add to our understanding and thus provide a better foundation for dealing with the issue. Specifically, this study will build on established findings from Army researchers by conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on the research topic with five former mid-grade officers and one senior noncommissioned officer.

## **Definitions of Terms**

**ADP 6-22:** Army Doctrine Publications 6-22 is the Army's leadership publication.

**Command:** A commander in the military service lawfully exercises this authority over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment. Command includes the leadership, authority, responsibility, and accountability for effectively using federal resources and planning the employment of military forces to accomplish assigned missions (Department of the Army, 2006).

**Command Climate:** Climate, described as the *feel* of the unit as evidenced by the prevailing mood or spirit. It involves an intuitive sense of the unit by its members. It is analogous to the internal state and health of the organization encompassed by the loyalties, attitudes, motivations, performance goals, and perceptions of all members and their collective capacity for effective interaction, communication, and decision-making. It is interrelated with generally understood concepts of morale, cohesiveness, and esprit de corps (Bullis & Reed, 2003, p. 1.).

**Toxic leader:** The toxic leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. Moreover, the toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves (ADP 6-22, 2012)

### **Chapter Summary**

The Army and other organizations have struggled with negative forms of leadership and its impact they have had on individual employees. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to study toxic leadership through the experiences of five former Army personnel to understand the effect toxic leaders have had on their morale. This study serves to increase the knowledge base about the impact of toxic leadership on troops' morale and the measures the Army is taking to address this issue.

Toxic leaders pose a daily test that can result in unnecessary stress and promote bad values (Reed, 2004) Moreover, this study will provide a better foundation for dealing with the issue and build on established findings from Army researchers. Chapter 2

provides a review of the literature as well as current studies related to toxic leaders.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of this study. Chapter 4 presents this study's results.

Finally, Chapter 5 discusses study limitations and implications for the future studies.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Toxic leadership has a devastating effect on soldier morale and the U.S. Army lacks an effective system to detect and remove toxic leaders. This chapter provides a review of the literature on toxic leadership and its impact on morale. In addition to the theoretical information covered in this chapter it is important to understand how previous research of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army helps shape the current understanding of this Army-wide problem. For purposes of this study, this literature review highlights three studies conducted by U.S. Army over the past twelve years, each of which supports both the design and the findings of this study, as well as, several researchers and scholars within the field.

### **Review of Literature**

**Definition of toxic leadership.** Toxic leadership can be broadly defined as a variety of negative leadership styles that may be successful in achieving short-term objectives but can damage the morale of subordinates and the cohesion of an organization (Box, 2012; Bullis & Reed, 2003; Doty and Fenlason, 2012; Duffy, Ganster and Pagon, 2002; Ellie, 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Matsuda, 2010; Mehta and Maheshwar 2014; Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2014; Steele, 2011; Williams, 2005; Wilson-Starks, 2003; Ulmer, 2012; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002).

All these authors noted that toxic leaders have a negative effect on others within an organization using acts of deception, bullying, coercion, favoritism, and manipulation.

Additionally, the researchers state that toxic leaders have a narcissistic focus on their own perceived desires over the needs of their subordinates and the organization as a whole (Doty & Fenlason, 2012). In the U.S. Army, damage done by toxic leaders to unit or company morale is particularly problematic. The ADP (2012) defines toxic leadership as:

A combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests. This may achieve results in the short term, but ignores the other leader competency categories of leads and develops. Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale (p. 3).

**Importance of morale.** Kane (2013) indicated that morale is a vital component of every military operation. In addition, the author stressed that high morale is regarded as almost vital to success and low morale as possible grounds for breakdown, which in a military framework could be catastrophic. Furthermore, Kane noted that low morale is always a cause for fear by commanders. Likewise, Bartholomees (2010) asserted that

leadership, morale, and discipline remain vital factors of military power. Currently, the US Army states the following about morale:

Morale is the Army's most important intangible human element. It is a measure of how people feel about themselves, their team, and their leaders. Units achieve high morale through effective leadership, shared effort, trust, and mutual respect. High morale results in a cohesive team striving to achieve common goals. Competent leaders know that morale holds the team together and sustains it during operations. Leaders can boost morale in the face of extreme danger by providing their Soldiers the means and support for successful operations. Units with high morale are usually more effective in operations and respond to hardships and losses better. Not surprisingly, these units often conduct reunions and maintain close friendships for decades after they have served together (ADP 6-22, 2012 p.6-5).

**Leadership theories.** Support for this study comes from three leadership theories. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford developed the authoritarian theory with their 1950 study. The second supporting theory is Narcissism and developed by Freud (1914). Third leadership theory in this study is Theory X and Theory Y, developed by McGregor (1960). Additionally, literature and studies in the field of negative forms of leadership are covered in this chapter (Bullis & Reed, 2003; Doty and Fenlason, 2012; Ellie, 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Matsuda, 2010; Mehta and Maheshwar, 2014; Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2014; Steel 2011; Ulmer, 2012; Williams, 2005; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002).

*Authoritarian theory.* Adorno et al. (1950) conducted a study at the University of California at Berkley to determine attitudes towards religious/ethnic minorities, views on politics/economics and morale values. They administered a questionnaire called the Fascism Scale (F-Scale) to a sample of 2,000 female and male Americans. Their F-Scale consisted of identifying personality types of conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition, stereotype, projectivity and lastly, exaggerated concerns over sex. Adorno et al. had respondents rate their strength of agreement or disagreement on the F-Scale. The sample numbers from the study were an equal balanced between male and female. In addition, one of the ten participants had a more in-depth interview under the supervision of Adorno's co-author Frenkel-Brunswik. For their study, the sub-sample consisted of one group that expressed more prejudice in authoritarian views and another group that expressed the least such views. The results of their study showed that males were equally balanced between high and lows of authoritarianism, but division in the females was between 25 high and 15 low. Adorno et al. wrote that a score of above 80 on the F-Scale indicates that the subject may be suffering from severe psychopathology. Overall, Adorno et al. wrote that participants in the groups were matched in age, political/religious view, and regional background and compared these factors to see if there was an effect on the scores of authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950).

Adorno et al.'s study was later criticized by Brown (1965) who argued that the structure of the F-Scale invited acquiescence responses (i.e., the respondents agree with one item because they agree with other items). Additionally, he stated that the analysis by Adorno et al. of the authoritarian personality suggests that because of some unconscious

fears, certain people may be more susceptible to stereotypical thinking and projection. In addition, Rosenthal (1966) pointed out that the interviewers in the Adorno et al. study knew both the hypothesis and the interviewee's test scores, therefore, possibly creating a bias and affecting the results to the study. However, Lasch (1991) noted that Adorno et al.'s study on authoritarian personality remains widely cited in current research into what forms the overall personality. In the modern interpretation of the F-Scale, Lipman-Blumen (2006) discovered that individuals who score high on the F-Scale are likely to obey authority and enjoy exercising authority over others. This style of leadership revealed by the F-Scale correlates to toxic leadership. In addition, Schmidt (2008) noted that the authoritarian leader demands unquestioning obedience from subordinates while asserting absolute authority. Lipman-Blumen (2004) recognized that "toxic leaders' partiality for authoritarianism fits neatly with their anxious followers' heightened insecurity: set adrift in threatening and unfamiliar seas, most of us willingly surrender our freedom to any authoritarian captain" (p. 100).

*Narcissism theory.* From a developmental perspective, Freud (1914/1991) viewed narcissism as a normal phase of wholesome development in children. Freud hypothesized that before children are able to devote their libido energy in other people they go through a phase in their lives called primary narcissism. Additionally, primary narcissism, which Freud refers to as the original libido, directs energy into the ego causing it to become over stimulated. Freud reminds us that this phenomenon is common among young children, especially in their belief in power within themselves. Moreover, Freud explains when the primary ego-libido is over stimulated the result can be displeasure focused onto a superficial objects. Hence Freud refers to the libido at this point as object-libido. Freud

goes on to say that when the object-libido is propelled *inward* after attachment to an outward object, the result is secondary narcissism. Subsequently, this causes the individual to become schizoid and cut off from the world. In a later essay, Freud (1931) described a narcissist as someone focused on self-preservation, independent, not easily intimidated, assertive, extraverted, high in activity, and unable to commit in relationships.

Freud help theorized the concept of narcissism but did not conduct a study.

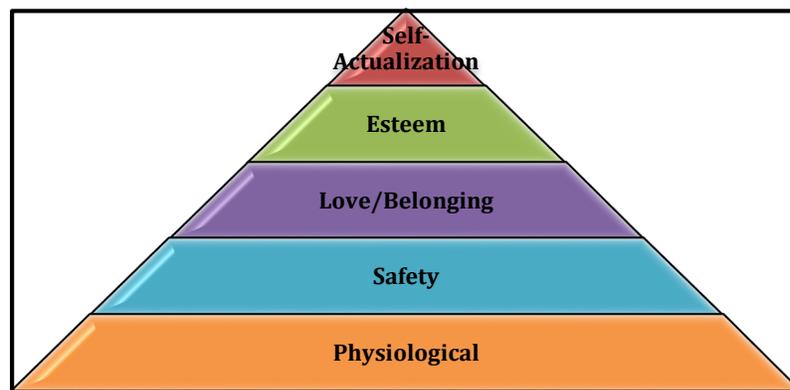
Walder (1925) conducted the first case study of an individual with a narcissistic personality disorder. Walder worked with a single-subject design using one participant, a scientist. Walder described his participant as having an attitude of superiority and being unsympathetic and selfish. From interviews with his participant, Walder concluded that narcissistic individuals are primarily those who focus on self-preservation. Additionally, he noted that as Freud would later argue, narcissistic individuals are highly independent, extraverted, aggressive, and unable to commit to an intimate relationship.

Lipman-Blumen (2004) and Schmidt (2008) both independently suggested that narcissism leads to a uniquely dangerous type of toxic leadership. According to Schmidt (2008), narcissism is a key component of toxic leadership but is a condition that many leaders suffer from. Lipman-Blumen (2004) attempted to describe how narcissism becomes apparent in toxic leaders across industries. Their research describes an exclusive blend of negative behaviors and attributes and refers to it as toxic leadership, arguing that this type of leadership has adverse effects on both individual subordinates and the organization as a whole (Lipman-Blumen, 2004).

***Theory X and Y.*** McGregor (1960) developed a philosophical view of social organization with his definitions of Theory X and Y. McGregor's work was based

theoretically on Abraham Maslow's 1954 study on the Hierarchy of Needs (1960).

Maslow (1954) had conducted a qualitative study using a biological analysis in which the author examined biographies of 18 individuals (i.e., Presidents, family friends, other influential figures) he recognized as being self-actualized. Moreover, he formed a list of characteristics from the biographical information. Maslow concluded that humans move upward through a hierarchy of needs, which he described in a pyramid to represent these needs (Maslow, 1954) See figure 2.1, Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



**Figure 2.1.** *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

McGregor bisected Maslow's hierarchy into lower-order needs (i.e., safety and physiological) and higher-order ones (i.e., love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization). The author indicated that there are two types of managers. One type of manager adheres to the notion that the motivation of subordinates result primarily from their lower-order needs. McGregor posits the other type of manager as the one who believes that the higher-order needs can better motivate employees. McGregor labeled these two belief systems Theory X and Theory Y.

Theory Y managers assume that their subordinates genuinely care for the organization that employs them. In addition, the Theory Y managers see subordinates as

responsible and motivated and are better able to exercise self-control. In contrast, McGregor maintains Theory X managers have a negative view of subordinates. Theory X managers tend to believe that subordinates are generally lazy and avoid responsibility. Perhaps more importantly, McGregor indicates these managers assume that employees habitually underperform and that exerting tight control over them is essential to ensure their performance.

Drucker (1998) pointed out that corporation borrowed the Theory X command-and-control model from the military over 100 years ago. He argued that Theory X leaders naturally adopt a more authoritarian style based on motivation by fear. In keeping with this view, Arslan and Staub (2012) wrote that Theory X leaders typically lead by threatening subordinates with punitive measures. Unsurprisingly, Lipman-Blumen (2006) indicated that Theory X leaders tend to create a toxic environment for their subordinates.

**Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and abusive leadership.** Zellars, Tepper, and Duffy (2002) defined Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB) as voluntary actions by members of an organization that promote its effectiveness. OCBs include work habits like helping coworkers with work-related problems, not complaining about trivial problems, behaving courteously to coworkers, and speaking approvingly about the organization to outsiders. A key element of the OCB definition is that a failure to perform OCBs is not punishable. The purpose of the authors' research was to investigate another way abused subordinates may seek to restore the situation to expectations—by ceasing to perform unmandated actions that benefit the organization and its representatives—that is, withholding OCB. Consequently, suppression of OCBs should be a safe way for abused subordinates to respond to abusive supervision. Zellars et

al. were interested in identifying the conditions under which abused subordinates would withhold OCB. Zellars et al. tested their OCB theory using data collected from 373 National Guard members and their military supervisors at an undisclosed Air National Guard unit. The researchers administered two surveys to the unit's members. The results of this research study suggest that when working for a toxic supervisor, subordinates complied to avoid the supervisor's fury but were not motivated to do more than what was strictly required. The authors viewed compliance as better than noncompliance, but point out that it is not a substitute for *commitment*, which leads to careful risk taking, creativity, and innovation.

Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) conducted a study that investigated the relationship between social undermining and behavioral outcomes of employees. The researchers stated that they conducted the study because of some largely ignored previous studies involving the negative side of social support in the workplace and of social interactions more generally. Duffy et al. (2002) surveyed 740 participants from the national Police force of the Republic of Slovenia. The researchers pointed out that police work involves intense social interaction that can set the conditions for either good or bad relationships amongst employees.

Duffy et al.'s 2002 research showed that if a person has a supportive environment in their work setting they are likely to have a more satisfied life. However, if social undermining occurs between co-workers and supervisors, there can be a negative effect on those who feel undermined or singled out, which damages their work performance. Duffy et al. recommended conducting a similar survey that investigated relationships

between different types of deviant behaviors and analyze the outcomes. They also proposed investigating whether subordinates imitate supervisor-undermining behaviors.

**Destructive leadership in the Army: Bullis and Reed.** Bullis and Reed (2003) conducted a study in 2003 to determine how the Army could effectively identify destructive leaders. The researchers used students and faculty members from the U.S. Army War College (AWC) to conduct their research. White (2003) had asked: “Given an institutional objective to establish and maintain effective command climate, how can the Army effectively assess leaders to prevent those with destructive leadership styles?” (p. 1.).

Bullis and Reed’s 2003 study addressed the topic of *command climate* as well as Army leadership’s role in affecting it. A diverse mix of students and faculty totaling 56 participants were involved in this qualitative study. Bullis and Reed explained that participants used the following operational definition of destructive leaders:

Destructive leaders are focused on visible short-term mission accomplishment. They provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions. But, they are also unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate. The majority of subordinates see them as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty. (p. 2)

Bullis and Reed (2003) noted that participants who were soldiers serving under toxic leaders become disappointed with the Army—or worse, they begin to emulate their toxic leaders. Additionally, Bullis and Reed stated that the study group was concerned about the negative impact of toxic leadership on retention, especially among junior officers, NCOs, and those otherwise eligible for retirement. Moreover, they stated that the

well-being of soldiers suffers under toxic leaders due elevated stress levels and general job dissatisfaction. Finally, participants in the study emphasized that destructive leaders do not produce the high levels of confidence that lead to cohesion and esprit de corps, which are critical to a unit's combat effectiveness.

**Toxic leadership taxonomy: Williams.** Williams (2005) added to the body of research on toxic leadership by attempting to establish a definitive taxonomy of toxic leadership, cataloging the make-up of the types of toxic leader she had identified. Accordingly, Williams created a compilation of 18 distinct (though overlapping) types of toxic leadership styles in the study conducted at the Army War College (AWC) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Williams (2005) characterized toxic leaders as those who engage in destructive behaviors and show signs of dysfunctional personal characteristics and maladjustment. This initial account served as her starting point for developing a better understanding of toxic leadership. Williams claimed that toxic leaders display the following traits: “incompetence, malfunction, maladjustment, feelings of inadequacy, chronic discontent, irresponsibility, amorality, cowardice, insatiable ambition, arrogance, selfishness, avarice and greed, lack of integrity, deceptiveness, malevolence or malice, and egotism” (p. 2). The following is a summary of Williams' (2005) taxonomy of 18 types of toxic leaders:

***The absentee leader.*** The absentee leader has no emotional investment or involvement in an organization. Being physically present is his only contribution and influence. His attendance record is poor and results in numerous structural and resource conflicts among his subordinates, who are frustrated by his incompetence.

***The incompetent leader.*** The incompetent leader's poor leadership is a result of their lack of requisite skills, indecisiveness, distractibility, and does little to gain respect from followers or inspire camaraderie.

***The codependent leader.*** The codependent leader usually maintains an unhealthy level of attachment to others around them. Over time, this leader becomes ineffective and stressed because they feel they do not have the help of their subordinates. In reality, this leader is fearful of causing any hardship to another. Moreover, they are viewed as an "any price" peacemaker who perpetuates a sense of distrust and uncertainty that can lead to failure.

***The passive-aggressive leader.*** The passive-aggressive leader has the ability to do well but limits his efforts due to fear of failure. This leader is crippled by fear to the extent that any scope of promotion due to exceptional performance is met with apprehension, which perpetuates failure. The leader's resistance to doing well manifests in inaction, temporizing, and even self-sabotage.

***The busybody leader.*** The busybody leader is often characterized by a lack of sustained focus on a specific task. This frequent inattentiveness may result in followers being unsettled as well. The busybody leader enjoys the adoration and attention of others, and so occupies him or her with multiple activities, yet never completes any. This type of leader spends many hours relentlessly trying to create an environment of friendship rather than one of successful attainment of goals.

***The paranoid leader.*** The paranoid leader can be highly intelligent, but often becomes encumbered by the belief that his ability to function as a leader is under threat from others. This type of leader is hostile to, and allows very little scope to, any form of

criticism even when constructive, regarding it as an affront to his identity and abilities. This leader's paranoia drives him to gain and cling to control in the organization, and he will forcefully resist anyone who even appears to assert him or herself.

***The rigid leader.*** The rigid leader is convinced that they alone are right. As a result, they are slow to welcome the ideas and opinions of others. To maintain his or her point of view, this leader surrounds her- or himself with subordinates who reflect this point of view. Consequently, this leader ensures that his followers are those who are unquestioning in their devotion and who always agree with his opinions and ideas. An organization run by this leader is likely to experience very little, if any growth.

***The controller leader.*** The controller leader shares some traits with the rigid leader. However, while both types surround themselves with like thinkers, the rigid leader will delegate some authority to only those who feel the same way. The controlling leader is unable to delegate and flatly refuses to. Not only does the controller not delegate, but he ensures that his opinion influences every aspect of decision making even when he lacks the skill set to provide any meaningful guidance or direction. The controller also takes pleasure in formal structures and processes, since such systems place him at the top of a hierarchy.

***The compulsive leader.*** The compulsive leader combines the traits of a rigid leader and a controlling leader with emotional inconsistencies. This leader has a need to control others and pursue perfection but may be unaware of this unchecked flaw in their personality. This leader's poor attempt at resolving their emotional disorder is manifested in the form of sudden violent outbursts leading to feelings of insecurity among their followers.

***The intemperate leader.*** The intemperate leader is provocative in nature and lacks the ability of self-control, which often involves this leader in questionable business practices. This is especially problematic when said behaviors are public and so have an adverse impact on the image of the wider organization. Depending on the type of behavior, the leader's character may come into question: if the leader cannot manage himself, he likely lacks the ability to manage both human and other resources.

***The enforcer leader.*** The enforcer leader is one who as a rule faithfully carries out the instructions of his superior. Within a supportive and healthy psychosocial environment, this leader is recognized as one who pays attention to details, is committed to the organization, and values its structure. However, if he works for a toxic leader, he will become quite toxic himself.

***The narcissistic leader.*** The narcissistic leader is superficially self-possessed and appears convinced that the world revolves around him. His narcissism, however, is driven by inner feelings of inferiority. This sense of inferiority interferes with his ability to perform well. Specifically, he is never satisfied with his accomplishments, as his value is defined by what he gains. Further, to maximize on his own feelings of self-worth, he minimizes the accomplishments and abilities of others.

***The callous leader.*** The callous leader lacks emotional intelligence and cares very little for the emotional needs of his followers. This leader's subordinates see him or her as uncaring, arrogant, abrasive, selfish and ill-tempered. To make matters worse, subordinates find this leader condescending in the manner in which he or she makes unrealistic demands.

***The street-fighter leader.*** The street-fighter leader is selective about how he treats his subordinates. Those who advance their agenda are highly regarded, while those who obstruct this leader's progress are shown are not looked upon favorably. This leader encircles himself with allies who can advance his position within the organization. Unfortunately, those within the organization who do not conform to the leader's vision are shown scant regard. This leader is very egotistical, and appraises his own value based on his accomplishments and his position as leader.

***The corrupt leader.*** The corrupt leader is extrinsically motivated, valuing power and money at any cost. This leader will lie, cheat, or steal to advance his goals. Those who follow this leader recognize that he is selfish and motivated extrinsically. These types of leaders will take immoral, unethical, and often illegal measures to meet their goals. Moreover, peers and subordinates distrust them, and this sentiment trickles down, affecting the ability of the organization to excel.

***The insular leader.*** This insular leader cares only for those in his immediate organization to the extent that they fail to consider the best interest of the rest of the organization. This leader is not concerned about the humanity of others, except those in his direct sphere of influence. While this great interest in their direct followers has its benefits, this separatist approach poorly communicates solidarity to outsiders. This type of leadership is common in political affiliations also.

***The bully leader.*** The bully leader come across as confrontational, argumentative, and contentious, and will display bitterness to others who perform better. This leader is ruthlessly toxic and uses insults, intimidation, and devaluation of others to achieve success. Moreover, this leader enjoys dominating and crushing others' egos to feel

superior—even to the extent of boasting. Additionally, while this leader appears competent, in reality their pompous posturing covers his insecurities. Also, this leadership style is prone to behaviors that degrade another. This leader is known to use threats, to instill fear in others, and set himself up as the sole power. This leader's behavior triggers fear in followers, granting him more control.

***The evil leader.*** The evil leader is comparable to a feared dictator, who metes out violence as he sees fit, using pain as an instrument of power. This style has also sparked research into the efficacy of toxic leadership styles, and their influence on followers to carry out atrocities. What keeps the evil leader on top is his ability to encircle himself with followers. Likewise, only followers who resist their influence and decide to challenge their authority can depose them.

Williams (2005) argued that it is vital for senior civilian and Army leadership to continue to identify and institute methods for dealing with toxic leaders while adopting practices of awareness-building that do not undermine their command authority. Williams proposed that it is through a thorough and general recognition of the problem that a systematic solution for minimizing toxic leadership and improving the organizational culture of the U.S. Army becomes a reachable goal.

**Toxic leadership and Army Culture: Elle.** Elle (2012) explained in his study that the consequences of toxic leadership in Army organizations are “all too real,” causing needless stress, decreased morale, and instilling negative values in the organization. Additionally, Elle noted, “One has to wonder if the impact of toxic leadership is so extremely negative, why anyone would engage in such behavior in the first place” (p. 4).

Importantly for the purposes of this study, Elle (2012) argued that the military's existing culture is also a contributor to the persistence and growth of toxic leadership. To begin with, military protocol requires respect for one's rank, even if there is no respect for the actual leader as a person. He indicated that the tendency for members of the military is to push through any situation to accomplish the mission, regardless of the challenges; this propagates a 'suck it up' mentality. In addition, he explained that the Army values such as loyalty are possible enablers for toxic leaders. Specifically, he notes that soldiers maintain a sense of loyalty to their leaders and the organization as a whole and feel conflicted about reporting a toxic leader. Furthermore, Elle pointed out that a toxic leader's boss is a factor in sustaining their toxic behavior. The researcher explained that toxic leaders tend to achieve short-term results while their bosses, for the sake of productivity, ignore their toxic behavior.

Elle (2012) made several recommendations for how to counter toxic leadership. Specifically, the author proposed frequent statements from senior leaders condemning toxic behavior, emphasizing that this measure would ensure that all uniformed and civilian leadership in the Army understands that there should be no tolerance for toxic leadership. Elle further recommended that when toxic behaviors are uncovered, especially in the most severe form, immediate action is necessary and the perpetrator must be dealt with and removed from the service. Elle stressed the use of programs and tools available to unmask toxic leaders. He explained:

The Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback 360 (MSAF/360), assessment would be a perfect tool to provide supervisors feedback on their subordinates' leadership shortfalls if the data was shared with the supervisor, and the individuals

completing the assessment were selected by some means other than by the individual being assessed. (p. 19)

In addition, the author argued that the Army's already established command climate survey process and individual interviews are viable methods that leaders can use to determine if toxic leadership exists in Army organization under their responsibility.

Elle also recommended that leaders simply employ the technique of "management by walking around," which allows them to easily get candid feedback about leaders from their subordinates. He stressed that keeping an eye the organizational climate is a first line of defense against destructive leadership. Furthermore, Elle asserted that an understanding of toxic leadership must be incorporated into leadership development programs, so the topic can be better understood, debated, and dealt with. Elle explained: "Leaders at every level of the Army must do everything they can, using every program at their disposal to establish a 'no-tolerance' mentality against toxic leadership to promote change in Army's culture" (p. 22).

**Toxic leadership and new forms of assessment: Box.** Box (2012) conducted a study that highlighted the nature, occurrence, gravity, and fears of toxic leadership in the military and recommended three strategies for implementing a more effective leadership culture for current and future generations entering the military. Box explained how the Army defines leadership and its definition of a toxic leader. He defined behaviors, characteristics, and symptoms displayed by both toxic and superior leaders. Finally, Box underlined strategies that the military could adopt to reduce and eliminate toxic behavior. Box used examples of toxic leadership and superior leadership to show the respective consequences when leaders are doing the right or wrong thing. He asserted that

organizations pay relatively little attention to toxic leadership. The author stressed that senior leaders should consider a new systematic approach to deal with toxic leaders and argued that the Department of Defense must consider a reassessment of leader development policies and promote curriculum reforms in academic institutions and military academies to reduce toxic leadership in the future. Box (2012) wrote:

A new approach is recommended in modifying the 360-degree assessment; there really is no solid solution to eradicating toxic leadership. Leaders cannot solely rely on evidence-based evaluations like surveys, assessments, and questionnaires to solve this problem; it all comes down to leadership. Superior leadership, whether it is an officer, NCO, or civilian, prevails over toxicity. (p. 21)

Box further argued that the military must embrace an Advisory Committee of Generals (ACG) to teach, mentor, and evaluate military leaders. Box goes on to say these senior trainers would assist in training future Brigade and Battalion level leaders and staff.

In addition, Box recommended that the Army continue to promote its 360-degree assessment program with the intent of assisting senior leaders identify the best leaders and ultimately removing the toxic ones. Furthermore, Box stressed that the Department of Defense and all the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command's (TRADOC) training entities must devote more resources and more time to teaching the topic of leadership.

**Components of toxic leadership: Schmidt.** Schmidt (2008) concluded that toxic leadership is a multi-dimensional concept that includes an array of destructive behaviors. The author's study developed a clearly defined operational definition of toxic leadership as well as a reliable scale for its measurement. Schmidt asserted that toxic leadership is

composed of five behaviors. These behaviors are self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarianism. Schmidt stated that toxic leadership is differentiable from other leadership constructs and that its dimensions significantly predict employee retention, morale, and approval of the supervisor. The study used 241 participants. Twenty-three of these, from various occupations within the military, were engaged in group discussions about toxic leaders and supervisors using semi-structured questions. The researcher did not disclose the location of those group discussions. The remaining 218 participants were from a large mid-Atlantic university and the researcher had them conduct a survey. Schmidt notes:

The survey included demographic questions designed to gather information regarding participants' age, sex, occupation, tenure at their current workplace, intention to turnover, reasons for turnover, and military service. The military service component of the demographics sheet asked about their military status, branch (Army, Navy, etc.), warfare community (Aviation, Surface Warfare, etc.), length of service, and pay grade (p. 42).

Schmidt's results indicated toxic leaders are narcissistic self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision. The researcher stated that the definition was important because it was the first time a study was able to define the concept operationally. Additionally, Schmidt indicates this uniform definition of toxic leadership allows organizations to characterize toxic trends in its leaders before their negativity affects the organization. Early exposure of toxic trends may enable senior supervisors to retrain leaders who are possibly toxic before they severely affect their subordinates.

Schmidt (2014), building on his 2008 study, conducted a large-scale follow-up study that investigated the impact of toxic leadership at the group level. This second study used 3,319 military members from all of the armed services divided into 149 groups and three deployment statuses. The groupings included 2541 participants divided into 113 sections that were in a low-stress garrison (or home base) environment. Also included were 121 people divided into nine sections deployed away from their home base, which was considered a high-stress environment. The remaining 657 people, grouped into 27 sections, were deployed an active war zone, constituting an extremely stressful situation. The researcher, in coordination with Military's Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI), distributed surveys to multiple U.S. military organizations including the U.S. Army. Using Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, mentioned earlier in this chapter as a grounding framework, Schmidt's 2014 study showed that toxic leadership also had a direct negative effect on group cohesion. Toxic leadership was found to be a full facilitator of the relationships between self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability and group-level job satisfaction. Moreover, the study broadened the scope of negative leadership beyond abusive supervision and group cohesion as an important mediator and demonstrated the value of COR theory as a framework for understanding negative leadership styles. Importantly, while the toxic leadership dimensions of unpredictability and abusive supervision were key predictors of job outcomes, self-promotion was the dimension with the most predictive power. Also and surprisingly, the deployment status of the military member did not have an effect on the outcomes of this study.

**Toxic leaders and soldier suicide.** Matsuda (2010) identified toxic leadership as a contributing factor to suicidal ideation among members of the U.S. Army. Matsuda, while employed with the U.S. Army in Iraq, conducted a qualitative study of eight cases of soldiers who committed suicide. The participants in his study were 50 soldiers who had some relationship to the deceased. Additionally, participants in this study were a cross section of soldiers ranging from the deceased senior leadership to their peers. He asked the following three open-ended questions:

1. What was your relationship to the individual?
2. What was their understanding of military suicide policy and prevention methods in general and how do these relate to suicides?
3. Did life history, command climate, organizational culture, and unit social relations play a part in individual's suicidal behavior?

Matsuda made 21 recommendations based on his questions. He noted that a toxic command climate could be just as potent as enemy contact in triggering suicidal ideation. Most important, Matsuda revealed that a total of eight soldiers were, at some point, bullied or ostracized by one or more of their leaders during the events that led to their attempted or completed suicide. Hence, although the evidence did not show that toxic leaders forced them to commit suicide, it did show that a toxic environment and/or leader were a contributing factor that led to this event.

Wilson (2014) reinforced Matsuda's findings, pointing out that an Army soldier who commits suicide often has personal problems and that toxic leaders can push them over the edge by making their lives a living hell. According to Wilson, it is not an

overstatement to say that U.S. casualties due to toxic leadership rival casualties from enemy combat.

Wilson (2014) supported Ulmer's (2012) statement that "toxic leadership is an institutional cancer." However, Wilson believed that toxic leadership could be understood in terms of evolutionary theories of social behaviour. He posited that toxic leaders subvert animal societies. Specifically, he argued that dominant individuals in many animal societies are not intelligent leaders acting on behalf of their subordinates and the group as a whole—instead, they act purely for their own benefit. These animal "toxic leaders" terrorize their underlings and continue to be self-serving until the next toxic leader ousts them. For this reason, Wilson asked why anyone would be surprised by the problem toxic leaders cause in a human social organization like the military

Wilson (2014) argued that toxic leadership persists in the U.S. Army because of a top-down, performance-based evaluation system. Because toxic leaders keep their subordinates in line, they are often better gaining favour with their superiors. Hence, toxic leaders are promoted despite their toxicity. Wilson proposed a new bottom-up evaluation procedure that allows subordinates to evaluate their leaders is showing promise.

**Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey, 2011.** Steele (2011) conducted a significant study specifically focused on toxic leadership. This two-year study provided U.S. Army leadership with an in in-depth analysis on the issue of toxic leadership Army wide. The Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) participants were representative of the U.S. Army population (23,000 soldiers) and of and of Department of the Army membership (6,800 civilians) randomly picked from the

Army's personnel database. The survey was Army-wide and administered electronically via email. Additionally, a two-year qualitative and quantitative sample study was conducted and presented as an addition to the main CASAL survey (2011).

Steele's (2011) results found that 83 percent of the nearly 30,000 participants had directly observed a toxic leader during the study period. Additionally, the study found that toxic leaders accomplish their goals more frequently than positive leaders, are perceived by their equals to achieve more leadership responsibility, and seem to advance through the ranks more rapidly. Furthermore, this study found that nearly one in five subordinates viewed their leader negatively. Most of the participants had interacted with a toxic leader and had experienced the interaction as severely problematic. Steele noted that toxic leaders' behaviors include destructive nitpicking, bad decision-making and concerned lack of concern with the idea of leading by example. The researcher further identified a link between toxic leadership and the following: penalization of honest mistakes, lack of direct discussion, reluctance to implement new ideas from subordinates, hindering of creativity, impeding of problem solving, and degradation of organizational morale. Likewise, Steele (2011) found that toxic leaders lack ethics, promote their own needs ahead of organization, and lack trust and confidence from their subordinates, especially in a life-or-death situation. Steele (2011) concluded that toxic leaders in the Army could create a cycle of long-lasting negative effects on morale, productivity, and retention of quality personnel. Steele states:

Four major recommendations came from Secretary White's (2003) tasking including: 1. Augmenting the Army's supervisor-centric leader evaluation system with peer and subordinate input. 2. Pursuing both evaluative and developmental

approaches to prevent toxic leaders. 3. Modifying unit climate assessments so that they focus on components useful to commanders. 4. Focusing on long-term success by recognizing legitimate concerns about subordinate input, applying a top-down approach, reinforcing chain of command responsibilities of providing feedback instead of relying on centralized selection boards, and minimizing the administrative load by leveraging web-based technology. (p. 28)

**Toxic leadership in the army and narcissism.** Doty and Fenlason (2012) in their professional journal article explore the link between toxic leadership and narcissism. Through analysis of routine incidents of toxic leadership and narcissism throughout the Army, these researchers summarize the signs of narcissism as the following: inattentiveness as a listener, inability to take constructive criticism, use of others to further one's own best interests, inability to empathize, exaggerated belief in one's importance and achievements, need for attention and admiration, and need for power and personal success. Moreover, Doty and Fenlason's empirical evidence led to their conclusion that narcissistic individuals also tend to be egotistical, manipulative, self-seeking, and exploitative, and in particular to take personal credit for the contributions of co-workers and subordinates. Worryingly, the authors found that the Army typically deems these narcissistic leaders successful and they are rewarded in the short term with increased leadership responsibilities. However, Doty & Fenlason argued that toxic and narcissistic leaders are not truly the kind of leaders the Army wants. This is partly because narcissism advances within these leaders progressively as they serve in their areas of greater responsibility.

**Non-military toxic leadership.** In a literature review, Mehta and Maheshwar (2014) attempted to trace the origins of toxic behaviors in order to understand the reasons for toxicity and its impact on individual and organizational performance. The purpose of their work was to understand the theory of toxic leadership and the behaviors exhibited by toxic leaders. The researchers described toxic leadership as “a series of purposeful and deliberate behaviors and acts of a leader that disrupt the effective functioning of the organization and are intended to maneuver, deceive, intimidate, and humiliate others with the objective of personal gains” (p. 20.).

Mehta and Maheshwari (2012) indicated in their literature review that history has also identified leaders with toxic leadership styles, including most notably Adolf Hitler, whom they describe as a prime example of a destructive leader. In particular, they noted that Hitler developed his toxic tendencies over a long period. Mehta and Maheshwar (2012) argued that executive mentors who work with leaders should assess how they educate and train leaders about the nature of toxic leadership and provide advice when leaders exhibit toxic behaviors. Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) wrote that toxic leadership is extremely dangerous to employees and to the sustainability of the organization. The authors stressed that toxic leadership will not disappear from an organization on its own; responsible and principled corporate guardians must drive it out. Furthermore, the researchers recommended that organizations should establish checks and balances for early detection of toxic leaders within the organization, because it allows the organization the opportunity to mediate and assist in re-educating toxic leaders. They stressed that identification of toxic conduct early in a leader’s career decreases the probability of developing enduring toxic behaviors.

Wilson-Starks (2002) sought to characterize toxic leadership by directly addressing its symptoms, characteristics, causes and effects. More importantly, she posed the question of whether toxic leaders can change. Wilson-Starks argued that toxic leadership's method of control is to diminish subordinates—and, ultimately, the company as a whole—by destroying their passion, originality, independence, and innovative thought. Toxic leaders, in other words, disseminate their poison through over-control and define leadership as being in control. Wilson-Starks further noted that in a toxic environment, rewards go to those who are like-minded and agree with the toxic boss while those who think differently are punished. Wilson-Starks wrote:

The “yes” people are rewarded and are promoted to leadership roles, while people who more fully engage their mental resources, critical thinking, and questioning skills are shut out from decision-making and positions of influence. (p. 2)

Wilson-Starks (2002) concluded that toxic leaders are people who suppress creativity, lack the ability to communicate, and create an atmosphere of distrust in the workplace. According to the author, these leaders became toxic because of a toxic leadership cycle in which toxic leaders mentor and coach up and coming leaders, causing them to operate with a flawed definition of leadership. Wilson-Starks noted: “They think they have to control everything, not realizing that over-controlling produces toxic effects.” The net result of all these toxic factors is systemic destruction throughout an organization. Additionally, she indicates under toxic leaders, employees have two options: obey or quit. Furthermore, she states those employees who remain endure a declining of outlooks of the job as a whole.

Wilson-Starks' (2002) recommendations present a three-step development process to promote change when dealing with a toxic leader. First, senior leadership should step in and effectively pressure the toxic leader to change in the form of a demand—change, or you're fired! Second, the toxic leader must be willing to commit to the process of change. Third, to the organization must continue to teach, mentor, and/or coach the leader through the transformation process, working from a specific plan custom-designed for that leader's situation.

### **Chapter Summary**

The U.S. Army has been grappling with toxic leadership and its impact on the individual soldier for over a decade. The purpose of this study is to understand the damage toxic leaders can cause and how the Army is addressing this phenomenon.

This review of the literature chronicled by the researchers used help frame this study supports the problem. This study proposes that U.S. Army lacks an effective system for detecting and removing toxic leaders from leadership positions, and toxic leaders have been shown to have a devastating effect on soldier morale. All the researchers highlighted in this study concur that toxic leadership is a problem that damages the well-being of subordinates, their productivity, and their retention, and, when left unchecked, even causes their deaths. Hence, toxic leadership destroys organizations. Moreover, all researchers point to various solutions that this study will explore, such as re-evaluating how the Army and employers train their leaders or exploring the replacement of older legacy-based evaluation processes with a newer holistic 360-degree process (Box, 2012; Bullis and Reed, 2003; Doty and Fenlason, 2012; Ellie, 2013; Matsuda, 2010; Mehta and

Maheshwari, 2014; Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2014; Steele 2011; Williams, 2005; Wilson-Starks, 2003; Zellers, Tepper and Duffy, 2002).

The work of three theorists is summarized in this literature review; each theory identifies and attempts to analyze aspects of human personality that have been subsequently identified as psychological components of toxic leaders.

The first is Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford's (1950) study on authoritarian personality. Elements from Adorno's Fascism scale (or F-scale) identified personality traits of conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition, stereotyping projectivity, and exaggerated concerns over sex. While Adorno's work has been significantly disputed and criticized since 1950, some of the personality dysfunctions that comprise the F-Scale resemble those associated with toxic leaders. Lipman-Blumen (2006) explains there is a close relationship between authoritarian behavior and some types of toxic leadership.

Second, Freud's (1914) study on narcissism is directly related to toxic leadership as it has been analyzed by recent research. Freud noted that individuals with narcissistic personalities need gratification from vanity and self-importance and/or indulge in selfish admiration of their own attributes. Like Freud's, Doty & Fenlason (2012) indicated that narcissistic leaders focus exclusively on their own achievements, livelihood, and self-image.

Third, McGregor's (1960) work Theory X and Theory Y describe a "Theory X" manager as committed to the view that subordinates will do the bare minimum required by their job descriptions—or less—unless they are motivated by fear of punishment or dismissal. Hence Theory X managers adopt an authoritarian management style is to

ensure that they will fulfill their job objectives. Goldman (2006) states that those individuals with Theory X style share some of the characteristics associated with toxic leaders.

Together, the theories of authoritarian personality, narcissism, and Theory X and Y each provide a basic conceptual framework on which to build an understanding of toxic leadership. By addressing the nature of this leadership style, organizations can work together with organizational psychologists to eradicate the problem either by retraining and educating or by other appropriate measures. Whatever the means, toxic leadership has the ability to destroy an organization and its personnel, as the next chapter will detail.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design**

### **General Perspective**

Ulmer (2012) argued that the Army should not spend additional resources on further external studies. All the necessary experience and expertise, he claimed, are available within Army agencies. However, this researcher takes the view that there is a need for more studies that demonstrate the impact of this leadership style on U.S. Army personnel. The present study is intended capture the impact of a toxic leader and/or the toxic environment they have created for the subordinates for whom they are directly responsible. This chapter provides an outline of the methodology and strategies used to assess the impact of toxic leadership on the morale of some soldiers who served in the U.S. Army and the policies that the Army employ to address this issue.

This qualitative study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) in interviewing five former U.S. Army members of mid to senior rank (as defined below) who provided information about their experiences. Smith & Osborn (2003) indicated that the purpose of an IPA is not to make hasty generalizations about large sample sizes, but to arrive at statements that are more general only after analysis of individual cases. IPA is a common research paradigm in psychology, and extends to other fields including social sciences, and education. IPA methodology has an active role in making sense and giving value to what a participant's comments uncovers and requires the researcher to interpret data thoughtfully (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, IPA is an inductive approach. IPA allows themes to emerge from personal accounts rather than applying an already

programmed theory, allowing for possibilities not considered in advance (Clarke, 2009). Coleman & Briggs (2002) reminded us that the fundamental task of an interpretive researcher is to examine the meanings of experiences and phenomena from the perspectives of the research participants.

In this study, the researcher conducted a series of five interviews. The interviews focused specifically on the participant's experiences while working under the supervision of a toxic leader or in a toxic environment. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated that such a qualitative approach seeks to understand personal experiences and explore a person's connection to or involvement in a particular event or process. When conducting IPA studies on relatively small sample sizes, it is important to find a reasonably homogeneous sample (Smith et al, 2009). Although the participants served in the U.S. Army in different capacities, each member shared the commonalities that come with being a part of the institution and having achieved command rank, which constituted a relative homogeneity.

Essentially, this IPA explored how these former soldiers made sense of their experience as it pertained to the impact toxic leaders had on them. Smith et al. (2009) explained semi-structured interviews give IPA participants the opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length. Moreover, Willis (2007) stated, "phenomenology focuses on the subjectivity and relativity of reality, continually pointing to the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them" (p. 53).

Interviewing retired U.S. Army personnel with recent experience allowed the participants to express their views more openly and frankly. In contrast, active members

of the military might not be as forthcoming with information because of their direct and ongoing affiliation with the Army.

This IPA addressed the following research questions:

1. What impact does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers?
2. What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks?

### **Research Context**

The researcher conducted one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five recently retired Army personnel that assessed the impact toxic leadership had on their lived experiences in the Army. This study focused on what participants experienced and on their observed reactions to the protocol of semi-structured interviews.

Additionally, the study evaluated the Army's policy in addressing the issue of toxic leadership. This approach gave breadth and depth to the analysis. The researcher is located in New York State, while four of the five participants were located in the Continental United States, specifically in the states of Arkansas, Virginia, Oklahoma, and New York. The fifth participant resided abroad in the Middle East. The researcher evaluated the results for patterns across stories and perspectives that provided a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of toxic leadership and what impact it had on them as soldiers and as human beings.

### **Research Participants**

Five individuals participated in this study. Participants had to have met two conditions in order to partake in this dissertation study. These conditions were that they had to be former U.S. Army personnel of *Mid to Senior Ranking*. This term denotes

anyone who has been in the military who has achieved a senior rank or who has acted in that capacity at the rank of Sergeant First Class (SFC) or higher. This rank constitutes the most junior of what the U.S. Army considers a senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). Furthermore, it is likely that a former member of the Army who has held the rank of SFC or ranks senior has had significant authority over mid-sized to large troop formations or staffs. Selecting senior members of the Army to interview allowed a broader and more informative view of the subject of toxic leadership..

In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participants were given color-coded pseudonyms. Four of the five participants are male and the fifth is female. Two of the five participants, one male and female, are of Afro-American decent. The remaining three participants are male Caucasian. Major Red is a 50 year old Caucasian man and a retired commissioned Army officer with over 30 years Army experience. Major Green is a 47-year-old African American man who is a retired commissioned Army officer. Major Green enlisted in the Air Force prior to entering the Army. Major Blue is 51-year-old Caucasian man who is a retired Army officer and suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Major Grey is a 50-year-old Caucasian man who is a retired Commissioned Army Officer with 30 years of military experience. Finally, Sergeant First Class White is an African American woman who is a retired Senior Non-Commissioned Officer with over 27 years of Army service. The demographic data is represented in Table 4.1.

### **Instruments to be Used in Data Collection**

For this IPA study, the semi-structured interviews were the data collection instrument. The interviews were semi-structured rather than held to a rigid questionnaire-

type format in order to allow the participants to elaborate on their responses and potentially open up new subtopics that the interviewer might not have anticipated from review of the literature but that were pertinent to the study. The interviews were conducted via Skype using a digital recorder program (only audio, no video) and a Zoom hand-held digital recorder. This meant that only audio recordings of the interviews were available for analysis. The researcher, however, also maintained detailed notes.

According to Creswell (2013), the basis of qualitative validity is on the determination that the findings are accurate from the viewpoint of the researcher, the participant, and the readers. Procedurally, the participants as well as the researcher are experienced former members of the U.S. Army. Moreover, their combined experience totals over 100 years of military service. These interviews were conducted from August 2014 through September 2014.

This study focused on five interviews with each case based on a series of semi-structured questions. Interview questions are listed in Table 3.1. Smith et al. (2009) stated that data collection is usually (but not necessarily) in the form of semi-structured interviews where the use of a flexible interview schedule is preferable and the participant has an important stake in what is covered. Smith et al. went on to point out that semi-structured interviews are also more relaxed than structured interviews. Moreover, they offered some leeway to explore a participant's responses by asking for clarification or additional information through follow-up questions (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, the researcher asked participants about their military careers and the specific positions they held prior to questioning.

Table 3.1

## *Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

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Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question(s)
RQ1: What impacts does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers?	<p>What impact do you think negative leadership has on the Army?</p> <p>Did you ever consider departing /leaving the Army because of your supervisor's leadership style? Please explain what happened.</p> <p>When you reflect on your Army career, are there any events that stand out in your mind? (with respect to toxic leaders) If yes, please explain.</p> <p>What lasting effect did your experience have on your morale while in the U.S. Army?</p>
RQ2: What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks?	<p>There have been many reports in the media recently about "toxic leaders." Do you agree that they should be weeded out? If so, how do you feel the Defense Department (U.S. Army) can weed out these types of leaders?</p>

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### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

Collection of the IPA data was by conducting a series of five interviews that included a protocol of six semi-structured questions focusing on the participants' perspectives and experiences with respect to toxic leaders and toxic work environments. Participants signed an informed consent agreement and assured of total confidentiality. During the interviews, no information they gave revealed their identity. The individual participant interviews lasted 60 minutes.

Four of the five interviews used an encrypted web-based video telephone program called Skype with a digital recorder add-on to record the interview, though the video

function was not used, which meant (as earlier noted) that only audio was recorded. The fifth interview was face to face in New York City at the participant's college in a private area set aside for military veterans. A Zoom HD digital recorder documented this fifth and final interview.

After each session, the digital interviews were uploaded onto a separate unmarked hard drive and locked in a password-protected digital security vault located at the researcher's residence. Upon completion of the interviews the researcher had, the digital interviews transcribed verbatim, totaling some 60 pages of interview data. As per IPA protocol suggested by Smith et al. (2012), each interview included the process of reading and rereading the transcribed data, taking notes and interpreting said notes, developing themes, and uncovering connections from the participants to the research on toxic leadership.

Nvivo for Mac coding software (2014) assisted the researcher in the development of themes. The data analysis involved a full review of the text. The researcher read and reread the data several times, which provided him with vivid understanding of what each individual had gone through in the situations they described. The overall results provided a broad understanding of the challenges faced by each participant while they worked in their toxic work environment.

## **Summary**

The study used the methods of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The essence of an IPA produced detailed interpretive accounts of participants' experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith & Eatough, 2008 and Clarke, 2009). The study design provided data for analysis in order to understand each former Army member's

story as it pertains to toxic leadership in the Army. Moreover, the researcher did play an active role; he was fully involved, drawing his own inferences from the interviewees' interpretations. The researcher collected data on the participants' experiences of toxic leadership in the Army that developed a better understanding of both how toxic leadership is manifested and its impact on subordinates.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

Toxic leadership represents a significant threat to the effectiveness of organizations like the U.S. Army. Through the analysis of first-hand, accounts shared by the participants, this study will add to our understanding of this phenomenon and provide a better foundation for action to deal with the issue. The theory of developed for Adorno's (1950) research on authoritarianism, McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y, and Freud's (1914) theory of narcissism provided the theoretical foundation for this study. Furthermore, this researcher also used current studies from both military and civilian researchers on toxic leadership including); and. (Box (2012); Bullis and Reed (2003); Doty and Fenlason (2012); Elle (2012); Goldman (2006); Lipman-Blumen (2006); Matsuda (2010); Mehta & Maheshwari (2014); Schmidt, (2014); Steele (2011); Ulmer (2012); Williams (2005); Zellers, Tepper and Duffy (2002). Collectively, studies from these experts assisted the researcher in assessing the factors that have allowed toxic leadership to continue in the U.S. Army; how this phenomenon continues impact morale of army personnel; and how effective current Army policies and protocols are in eradicating this form of leadership within its ranks.

**Demographic background.** The five participants in this study are former members of the Army. Four of the five held the rank of Major and the fifth participant is was Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) who was a Sergeant First Class (SFC). Four are male; one is female with all having at least 20 years of service. To provide anonymity,

each participant received a pseudonym: Major Red, Major Blue, Major Green, Major Gray, and SFC White.

Major Red retired as an officer after over 20 years' experience. Now living in the Midwest United States, he is married with children. Major Red works in the Middle East, where he works as a contractor for the U.S. government.

Major Blue is a retired officer who served time in the Air Force and then decided to join the Army and retired in 2008. Major Blue is a retired officer who has 20 years of service in the military. Currently, he is a senior manager for the Federal government near the District of Columbia. He is married with two children.

Major Green is a retired officer who suffers from PTSD and has between 20 and 25 years of military experience. Major Green is unemployed and is currently a stay-at-home dad living in Oklahoma. He is also married with one child.

Major Grey is a retired officer with 30 years of military experience. He is married with four stepchildren and is self-employed. He resides near Arkansas, USA.

Sergeant First Class White is a retired Senior NCO with over 27 years of military experience. SFC White is a widow, and at the time of this study was a student pursuing her second Master's Degree under the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Table 4.1 represents the summary of participants' general demographic data.

Table 4.1

*General Demographic Data for All Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	Years of service	Military Retirement Year	Education Level	Race	Marital Status	Employed
Major Red	M	50	30	2012	Masters	Caucasian	Married	Yes
Major Green	M	47	26	2008	Masters	African-American	Married	Yes
Major Blue	M	51	20	2012	Bachelors	Caucasian	Married	No
Major Grey	M	50	30	2011	Bachelors	Caucasian	Married	Yes
Sergeant First Class White	F	56	27	2012	Masters	African-American	Widow	Yes

**Qualitative methods.** The researcher conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis. This method focuses on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By using in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to mine rich textual data, and then analyze each of the answers to the study's research questions.

**Interview data.** Skype Voice-over-Internet (VOIP) was the primary method for data collection for four of the interviews, while the last one was face-to-face. The researcher collected the data for this study using a digital audio recorder. Upon completion of the interviews, a professional transcriber transcribed verbatim the digital recordings, and sorted them into five individual Word documents. The researcher used Nvivo for Mac (2014) to assist in analyzing the transcribed data. Nvivo for Mac is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package. Designed for qualitative

researchers, Nvivo QDA works with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where detailed analysis of data is required. The intent of Nvivo is to help people organize and analyze non-numerical or unstructured data. Moreover, the software allows for classification, sorting and arranging of information. Additionally, the evaluation and coding of quotes from the interviews enabled the researcher to align them with applicable research questions.

The researcher employed a convenience sample in which the researcher was the data collection instrument. The interviews were semi-structured and recorded online via a digital recorder program. The participants had to meet two conditions in order to partake in this study: (a) Participants had to have been former U.S. Army personnel who held the rank of Sergeant First Class (SFC) or senior, and (b) Participants must have been retired from the military.

Four of the five interviewees were located in the states of Arkansas, Virginia, Oklahoma, and New York. The fifth interviewee is living abroad in the Middle East. Four of the five interviews used Skype with a digital recorder to record the conversation. The in-person interview with SFC White took place in New York City and a digital recorder recorded the interview.

**Theme identification.** Nvivo coded the transcripts, which allowed the researcher to identify trends and cross-examine information using a deductive process. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) indicate the development and expansion of codes and subsequent themes reflect not only the participant's original thoughts but also the analyst's interpretation. Table 4.2 below outlines the major themes identified in the study. The identified themes are (a) Toxic leaders in the army lead from a position of self-

interest; (b) Toxic leaders in the army have a negative impact on morale; (c) Specific measures that the army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective, and finally; and (d) There needs to be a culture change within the army before toxic leadership can be eradicated.

***Toxic leaders in the army lead from a position of self-interest.*** From the reports of the participants, it is evident that toxic leaders operate from a position that is almost exclusively one of self-interest. Several of the respondents provided instances in which the selfishness of a toxic leader put service-members directly in harm's way. The actions of the toxic leaders also included cheating and committing actual crimes against personnel under their command. In one situation, SFC White had personal knowledge of criminal activity perpetrated on Army personnel by a toxic leader. She stated, "While I was a Military Police officer I helped investigate five rapes... I had a female captain approach me and told me about one of my soldiers sexually harassing her, and the command didn't report it because the accused had received the Soldier of the Year award from the Army... It would look embarrassing to the command if a 'stellar soldier' like him were to be brought up on charges...An investigation was done but nothing ever came out of it...it simply went away."

***Toxic leaders in the army have a negative impact on morale.*** All participants expressed that toxic leaders are devastating to morale. Major Red: "Toxic leadership affects the whole Army". Major Grey: "Negative leadership is to me a horrible situation because literally it can get your soldiers killed." Major Blue: "Make no mistake—these toxic leaders will do everything they can to destroy you." Major Green: "Negative leadership stifles growth and productivity of the organization. Because of it [toxic

leadership] people will do just the bare minimum and probably feel that they could grow and be contributing members...If soldiers feel that leaders don't really care, their mindset would be 'Why should I do more? I will do the minimum just to stay employed.'

***Measures that the army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective.*** Participants agreed that there need to be effective measures to deal with toxic leadership but expressed that it would be unrealistic to imagine that the Army can eradicate it. Major Blue: "These toxic types are the real problem. How are you going to get rid of them when the Army seems to be full of them?" Major Green: "We cannot weed them out...to do that is unrealistic".

***Culture change must occur.*** All participants agreed that creating any real change in the Army would be a challenge. They further agreed that problems such as nepotism and favoritism are contributing factors that prevent any real change. Major Grey: "Our toxic leader of a boss managed to work himself out his job and get fired while we were in Iraq...Instead of removing him from the Army altogether, the Army gave him an excellent assignment in Jordan. When word got back to us, we felt as if the guy got promoted instead of being relieved." Major Green: "You know leadership, you lead people, you manage assets, and the Army is in the people business...we've got to take care of those things to make sure we take care of our people, because without people we don't have an Army, without people we don't have a democracy, it's that simple." (See Table 4.2: Themes and Descriptions from Participants.)

Table 4.2

*Themes and Descriptions from Participants*

Themes	Participants' Description
Toxic leaders in the Army lead from a position of self-interest.	The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. They cheat and commit crimes, against personnel under their command.
Toxic leaders in the Army have a negative impact on morale.	Abusive and intimidating behavior towards subordinates leads to their suicide, early retirement, nepotism
Measures the Army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective.	Current policies and practices to eliminate toxic leaders are ineffective. Competent leaders suffer while toxic leaders continue to thrive and achieve rank.
There needs to be a culture change within the army before toxic leadership can be eradicated	Eradication of toxic leaders unrealistic but they can be retrained through mentoring, feedback and introspective assessment of themselves.  Modification or full replacement the Army's evaluation process to a more progressive means such as a climate survey based or 360 based evaluation process in which subordinates have input in the evaluated leaders annual report.

**Major findings.** This IPA study explored and analyzed the perceptions of five former Army members about toxic leadership in the U.S. Army with a focus on their personal experiences and observations obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The two research questions that guided this study were the following: (a) what impact does toxic leadership has on morale of individual soldiers? (b) What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks?

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine toxic leadership through the experiences of former Army personnel and to understand, from their perspective; the impact toxic leaders have had on their morale. Moreover, this study sought to discover whether the U.S. Army's current policies towards toxic leaders are effective. Responses to the interview questions allowed for the examination of toxic leadership through direct experiences of the participants. Findings for research question one were elicited through interview questions two, three, four and six. Additionally, interview Question 1 helped to develop an understanding of how the five participants generally described negative or toxic leadership. The remainder of this chapter consists of three parts: research questions, data analysis, and findings and summary of the findings.

### **Research Questions**

This section presents the results as they pertain to the research questions of this study. The six interview questions explored the two research questions. Table 3.1 illustrates the mapping of the interview questions to the research questions. Moreover, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) indicates IPA researchers usually try to find similar participants for which the research question will be meaningful and by using the participant's words verbatim, adds depth to this study.

**Research question 1.** What impact does toxic leadership have on the morale of individual soldiers? The Army personnel interviewed identified several characteristics and actions of the leaders that they classified as toxic. Judging by the reports of these participants, toxic leaders operate from a position that is predominantly one of narrow self-interest. This form of leadership leads to a negative impact on the morale of the personnel under their command. The participants noted that the unhealthy environment these leaders created caused a host of problems, including serious crimes as well as abusive and intimidating behavior towards subordinates.

**Research question 2.** What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks? Interview question five was used to explore the scope of this question(see Table 3.1). Primarily, participants agreed that toxic leaders' expulsion would be for the good of the Army. Additionally, they agreed the Army has not been effective in accomplishing the removal of problematic, toxic leaders because the problem is too pervasive and that therefore it is unrealistic to try to stop them. Similarly, they felt that measures that the Army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective. Participants had various views on how to deal with toxic leaders. All agreed, however, that there needs a cultural change in the Army before toxic leadership can be systematically eradicated. All the participants emphasized the need for effective training, retraining, mentoring, and reassessing how the Army develops soldiers, officers, and non-commissioned officers.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

**Introduction.** The interviews provided the researcher with a variety of data that spoke to toxic leadership and its impact on morale from the participants' perspective.

Additionally, the data in this part of the study shows the results relating to the two research questions mentioned in chapter one of the study. Using quotes from the participants not only expanded the sub-themes for each of the research, but also added more dimension in answering the research questions. Refer to Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

*Research Questions and Description*

Research Questions	Description
What impact does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers?	<p>Toxic Leaders were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unqualified for the job</li> <li>• Used intimidation</li> <li>• Cheated</li> <li>• Committed crimes for personal gain</li> <li>• Damaged morale</li> <li>• Linked to suicide</li> </ul>
What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks?	<p>The Army's current policies are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrealistic</li> <li>• Lack necessary training to prevent toxic leaders</li> <li>• Should incorporate retraining and mentoring of toxic leaders</li> </ul>

**Research question 1.** What impact does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers? Interview Questions two, three, four, and six were used to explore the

dimensions of this question. Based on responses to the four interview questions, the theme of selfishness was the most pervasive, and manifested itself in a variety of ways. Respondents felt that toxic leaders had a negative impact by being unqualified to do the job assigned, were willing to commit crimes to advance themselves, and behaved selfishly. Furthermore, all of the participants noted that toxic leadership had eroded morale and increased depression and suicide among troops; three of the five reported that they considered leaving the Army early due to the toxic leadership they experienced.

*Unqualified for the job.* One of the major concerns expressed by the participants was that toxic leaders are usually not qualified for the positions they hold. Major Blue: “They can go all the way to the top, they don’t have to deploy, they don’t have to be qualified in their jobs, they don’t even have to have the ability to do anything.” Major Blue also argued that toxic leaders seem under qualified because they look good on paper:

They had all of the key assignments throughout their career, attended schools, received awards and skill badges, completed professional military and civilian education. It wasn’t until they were put in charge of an Army formation or placed in a key staff position that they become miserable people to work for or showed their real true colors. This has been the same broken record being played over and over again [...] these toxic leaders are nothing new.

Major Blue went on to state: “Their bosses probably cared about getting results and did not care how it was done or what they did to their people or how these people berated them in the process.” Major Grey spoke to the hazards of unqualified leadership in the military, noting: “To me it's just a horrible situation, because literarily your soldiers

get killed, you get leaders who are so much interested in what they want done, instead of the mission or the job.”

In summary, an unqualified leader typically looks good on paper but lacks the real qualifications of character and experience and because of self-interested behavior is dangerous to the well-being of soldiers under his command.

***Intimidation, cheating and committing crimes for personal gain.*** One of the more problematic dimensions of toxic leadership reported by the respondents was the incidences of intimidation, cheating, and crime committed by toxic leaders as they sought either to maintain their power or choose to abuse it. In one example, Major Green stated: “He [the toxic leader] took that mission, he selectively took everything that benefited him and everything was obvious, because he saw the precedent by doing that and it therefore adversely affected the morale and the work in my unit”. Major Blue provided an example of grade tampering by a toxic leader. “I had a watch instructor who was grade tampering, and he was doing all sorts of real unusual things with grades in order to advance cadets he liked and to get rid of cadets he didn’t like.” Major Red chronicled the use of intimidation among toxic leaders, providing an example of a leader he encountered, saying: “The way he intimidated people was by questioning them, trying to test them... He would write things down, he would write everything down.” Major Red protested this leader’s behavior to his superiors, in vain: “Why can't you save him for a staff position and supply or something, and move him away, not in charge of soldiers, this is what I said, I said because somebody is going to get hurt or something is going to happen if you don't.” Moreover, SFC White revealed some of the criminal activity that was going on, talking about “the criminal bullshit that was going on right under our nose. I witnessed

arrest of some of the officers I served under who were having sex with female soldiers who, by the way, were running a prostitution ring behind our barracks inside a container that they were using to wash down the dogs.” “The girls were running the prostitution ring; the officers were the ones paying for it [sex]”.

More generally, participants revealed that there were instances where through their selfish actions toxic leaders intimidated, cheated, and committed serious crimes. These actions are synonymous with a bad command climate toxic leaders can propagate.

***Damage to morale.*** The negative impact that toxic leadership had on morale was a significant and recurring theme expressed by the participants. All five reported that their experience with negative or toxic leadership had a destructive impact on their morale while in the U.S. Army. Major Red: “No one wants to work for... or be motivated by fear, nobody wants to work for a person who has the leadership style who is—you know, degrading the troops.” The impact on morale was presented in different ways, including an account by one Major whose career was jeopardized by a toxic leader and another who witnessed depression and suicide. All of them said that there were times when they and others had considered leaving the Army as result of their experiences with toxic leaders.

Major Blue said: “Oh, it was horrible, because basically you know, after seeing something like this, and I saw other people who went through a situation like this, first thing most of them get very depressed... sometimes they’ve even decided on suicide.” Major Grey’s experiences with a toxic leader were erosive to his morale and that of others under the toxic leader’s command: “I was worried he's going to get some of my soldiers killed with his own stupidity. I had multiple soldiers that are going to come back

from this war stressed.” He also said, “My personal career was jeopardized with him in the fact he actually told his commanders and his higher officers that the people with him made the problem, not his fault.”

The loss of personnel who chose to leave the Army due to toxic leadership was a point of discussion with three of the respondents. Major Grey: “Yes, I’ve thought about it quite often, I thought about leaving military because...you know I’ve had bad leaders, strange bad leaders. My worst toxic leadership experience was in Iraq and the only thing he cared about, for Christ sake, was his own advancement.” Major Blue acted on these feelings: “I decided it was time for me to get out because I would see too many bad people going to the top and I saw too many good people getting sidelined.” However, Major Red managed to achieve a different approach to toxic leadership and was able to maintain his morale despite the challenges imposed by toxic leaders at different points in his career: “I kept marching on no matter who was the leader; I was never intimidated by a poor leader.”

Damage to morale can cause host of problems such as depression, suicide, and soldiers deciding to leave the Army. Toxic leadership can have a devastating effect on an organization.

**Research question 2.** What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks? Interview question five was used to explore the scope of this question (see Table 3.1). Participants mentioned the reports circulated through the Army on the issue and the new guidelines in Army command manuals. A new evaluation system intended to take into account the views of subordinates is also being put in place. However, participants felt that there was as yet no systematic set of effective measures

adopted that might be successful in taking on the toxic leadership problem. Participants agreed that eradication or “weeding out” toxic would be good for the Army. Additionally, they agreed that the Army has not been effective in accomplishing the removal of problematic, toxic leaders and that it is unrealistic to try to root them all out. In their view, this is because one person can view a leader as being toxic while another can view that same person as being a good leader. Moreover, a toxic leader’s boss may turn a blind eye because in the short term toxic leaders typically do get results. Similarly, participants concurred that measures the Army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective. Major Blue stated:

In truth, they haven’t done nothing (*sic*). The Army’s new evaluation system is not the answer. The Army acknowledges that they have a toxic leadership problem. However, toxic leadership is just a piece of a larger culture problem in the Army. When we brought up toxic behavior in our units we were told by one General at our staff meeting, ‘If you don’t like it, turn in your ID Card’ [meaning get out]. And this was the most senior officer in the command saying this to us. In this case, he just didn’t care if we had a toxic leadership problem.

SFC White: “I wouldn’t know. I got so fed up with the toxic environment I just said to myself ‘It’s about survival! It’s fight or flight! Self-preservation and let the next person handle it!’” However, other participants had various views on how to deal with toxic leaders. All agreed that cultural change in the Army is needed before toxic leadership can be systematically removed. In addition, the Army should be reassessing how they develop soldiers, officers, and non-commissioned officers.

*Eradication of toxic leaders is unrealistic, but they can be retrained.* All the participants agree that actual elimination of toxic leaders is unrealistic. However, Major Green and SFC White offered retraining and mentoring as a possible remedy. Major Green stated:

It is not a matter of weeding them out, because it is unrealistic. If we go back in history, toxic leaders have always been around. However, it is a matter of how we deal with them and how to recognize it and at the same time address it as perpetual professional development. Some individuals are in this category and they are not aware that they are toxic. I say this because the Army has spent a lot of time and resources on these individuals and I think it is best to get to the root of the problem rather than weed them out. Overall, I would say more professional development and a more introspective look at the individual and provide them with tools and techniques to become productive leaders.

SFC White's answer was similar to Major Green's thoughts, though she focused mainly on how the Army trains its leaders. SFC White, "Simply put, re-evaluate how we grow, teach, and train our leaders. Some come into the military thinking it is like the war movies in the cinema or some video game...that is not reality."

*Removing competent leaders and not toxic ones.* Two participants in this study agreed that measures that the Army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective. They felt that competent leaders suffer while toxic leaders continue to thrive and achieve rank. Major Grey: "I really don't know how they would weed them out. I wish they would. My own worry is that the truly poor leaders will not be weeded out, but they will weed out the...competent leaders." Major Blue: "They just keep promoting

those folks while the rest of us who work hard find ourselves being passed over for promotion.”

***Modification of army’s professional evaluation process.*** Two participants argued that modification or full replacement of the Army’s evaluation process would help deter toxic leaders. Major Blue: “Soldiers have got to have the ability to say what’s wrong, and that is something else I think we need to do... The current evaluation process is outdated and it needs to be more like a 360-degree type of evaluation [...] That way you [subordinates] have an opportunity to evaluate bosses, and I think that is something we need to look at.” Major Red also suggested a comprehensive, holistic-type evaluation process, which would entail modifying the current evaluation process. Major Red noted: “One way would be to create a web-based command-climate survey system whereby soldiers can log on and respond to a list of command-climate questions about their unit.” Moreover, these questions would pertain to the overall climate as well as to specific leaders. Doing this would deter toxic behavior in the command. Major Red explains: “If we were able to target a unit which has a bad leadership and you just want to go ahead and survey that unit, you can actually, without retribution.” Information obtained in this way could be used when that toxic leader’s annual evaluation is due. Major Red: “If someone had one or two of these evaluations in their record, their careers will be done.”

Current policies are not eliminating toxic leadership. In sum, the participants noted the consideration of detoxifying toxic leaders through training, mentoring, and retraining along with an overhaul of the evaluation process for soldiers should be the next step. This shows that there are other potential ways to deal with toxic leaders short of removing them from the Army.

## **Summary of Results**

The findings revealed Army personnel's perception of toxic leadership, its impact on morale, and the steps that the Army is taking to rectify the situation. The research highlighted first-hand accounts of toxic leadership and perceptions of the effects toxic leaders have on the organization and individual morale. Participants agreed that self-interest is the predominant trait found in toxic leaders, and that their resulting behaviors had a negative impact on morale. Additionally, the efforts the Army is making to rectify the situation are not effective. However, the research did generate other proposed initiatives, which include developing better soldiers from start to finish by means of effective initial and ongoing holistic evaluation (including input from subordinates), mentoring, coaching, and retraining of toxic leaders. Meanwhile, toxic leadership remains a threat to soldier morale. Finally, a shift in the Army's culture must occur before eradication or even a serious reduction in negative leadership can occur. Evidently, more attention paid by command to the views of the leader's subordinates, perhaps via such tools as a web-based evaluation comment system, would be a key part of that cultural shift.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will address this study's findings, implications, recommendations, limitations, and conclusions for research and practices related to toxic leadership in U.S. Army, its impact on morale, and the Army's current policies intended to address toxic leadership and their impact on the phenomenon. Recommendations made from this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study, based on the implications, could help Army leadership gain more awareness of the impact toxic leadership is having on individual soldiers. Additionally, the study revealed some of the limitations of the Army's current policies in place to eradicate this phenomenon. This study adds to already established findings in the field on why and how toxic leadership occurs and is tolerated or at any rate not significantly reduced. Recent studies indicate that toxic leaders still pose a problem in the U.S. Army. This study uncovered some positive proposals for how toxic leaders might be more easily identified without removing them from the Army (Bullis and Reed, 2003; Doty and Fenlason 2013; Ellie, 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Matsuda, 2010; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2014; Reed, 2014; Steele, 2011; Ulmer, 2012; Williams, 2005)

### **Implications of Findings**

In this dissertation study, this researcher selected five retired Army participants to participate and evaluate the two research questions. In-depth interviews were used to collect data and Nvivo was employed to assist the researcher with the data analysis. The

data analysis provided answers to the two research questions. The guiding questions for this study were; What impacts does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers? In addition, what is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks? The answers to these questions are important because the findings of this study concur with previous studies advocating further research. Williams (2005) argued that identifying toxic leadership early could be achieved through further research. Williams also maintained that negative leadership can be better recognized and addressed through additional education of army personnel (Williams, 2005). In addition, Schmidt (2014) indicates that by advancing knowledge of toxic leadership, there might be increased opportunity to decrease its prevalence and reduce its destructive impact.

This study augments existing studies that deal with toxic leadership in the Army, its impact on morale and the policies the army are employing to address the situation. The study's findings support previous studies regarding a primary characteristic of the toxic leadership style of leading from a position of self-interest. Findings also point to the negative impact that such leadership style has on the morale of the troops they lead. Additional findings that support previous research are that current Army policies are not strong enough to eradicate this phenomenon. The suggestion that there is a need for a complete change in organizational culture was an unanticipated result.

**Leading from a position of self-interest.** An analysis of this theme revealed a blatant example in which leading from a position of self-interest can have a serious impact on soldier morale. The dangers of working for an unqualified leader were a manifestation of self-interest that had an impact on soldier morale (See Table 4.3). One participant, Major Grey, stated: "He [the toxic leader] selectively took everything that

benefited him... His actions included volunteering my company to conduct a mission we were not qualified to do. Why? Because the position he would fill put him in line for possible promotion.” Major Grey went on to describe the situation in which his boss unnecessarily took his soldiers on an 8-hour convoy trip into Northern Iraq that was a known enemy hotbed just because he wanted to take a sightseeing tour and view the ancient monuments in the area. Major Grey noted: “I was worried he's going to get some of my soldiers killed as a result of his own stupidity.” Findings in this case showed how self-interested action exhibited by an unqualified leader could negatively influence soldier morale.

Box (2012) reminded us that the Army is an institution of high ethics and values and that we [specifically, the Department of Defense] must pay attention to toxic leadership because of the serious consequences caused by this leadership failure. Major Grey’s commander acted irresponsibly by thoughtlessly exposing his soldiers to enemy attack and risking their lives because he wanted to take a sightseeing tour, knowing it was in an area teeming with enemy activity. Additionally, findings that toxic leaders have a negative impact on morale while operating from a position of self-interest directly align with the literature reviewed in this study. Doty and Fenlason (2012) found that toxic leaders are selfish and self-serving individuals who crush morale. Moreover, ADP 6-22 (2012) also reminds us that toxic leadership is derived from a set of self-absorbed attitudes that destructively affect subordinates. Along the same lines, Ulmer (2012) proposed that toxic leaders are driven by self-centered careerism at the expense of their subordinates. Finally, Reed (2004) pointed out that subordinates might not have the perspective necessary to evaluate the whole person, but they are certainly in a position to

comment on certain important leadership behaviors and whether they trust and respect their leaders.

**Leaders who have a negative impact on morale.** An analysis of this theme revealed multiple displays of toxic leader abuse that impact morale. Participants noted that toxic leaders contributed to suicides among some subordinates; threatened their personal careers; intimidated subordinates; and in some cases were involved in criminal activity. One participant, Major Blue, expressed that toxic leaders were devastating to morale because of their harshness and drove some of his subordinates to consider suicide as a solution. Major Blue stated: “I saw other people who went through a situation like this [dealing with a toxic leader who is systematically abusive]...most of them get very depressed...sometimes they’ve even decided on suicide.” Additionally, threats directed at their career resulted in subordinates showing a lack of interest in their assigned positions. Major Green explained: “Negative leadership stifles growth and productivity of the organization.” He also remarked: “Because of it [toxic leadership] people will do just the bare minimum and probably feel that they won’t grow and be contributing members...If soldiers feel that leaders don’t really care, their mindset would be ‘Why should I do more? I will do the minimum just to stay employed.’” Intimidation was found to be an effective tool employed by toxic leaders. Major Red stated: “No one wants to work for... or be motivated by fear, nobody wants to work for a person who has the leadership style who is—you know, degrading the troops.” Toxic leaders’ actions are not limited to intimidation; illegal activity conducted by toxic leaders also negatively impacted morale. SFC White revealed some of the criminal activity, “the criminal bullshit that was going on right under our nose.” Specifically she reported: “I witnessed arrest of some of the

officers I served under who were having sex with female soldiers who were running a prostitution ring.” Matsuda’s (2010) findings showed a relationship between toxic leaders and eight cases of soldiers deployed to Iraq who committed suicide. Moreover, evidence from Matsuda’s study indicated that toxic leadership was actually a contributing factor in these deaths. In this current study a number of the thematic responses aligned with Matsuda’s study stating toxic environments contribute to suicidal ideation.

Williams’ (2005) study proposed taxonomy of 18 types of toxic leader. The themes that emerged from the participants’ responses in the present study corresponded with seven of the characterizations of toxic leaders found Williams’ taxonomy (see Table 5.1).

In all these ways, results of this study both reinforce and deepen understanding of the nature of toxic leadership and its effect on soldier morale. Regrettably, they also make it clear that from the participants’ perspectives, current Army efforts to address the problem are inadequate and that efforts to eliminate toxic leaders from the Army are unlikely to succeed.

Table 5.1

*Categories of toxic leader compared to Williams (2005) study.*

Themes	Participants Descriptions/comments	Williams (2005) categories of toxic leaders
Toxic Leaders in the army lead from a position of self-interest	Cheating	The evil leader
	Crimes against personnel under their command	The corrupt leader
Toxic Leaders in the army have a negative impact on morale	Abusive and intimidating behavior towards subordinates	The narcissistic leader The bully leader The evil leader The insular leader
	Unqualified for the job  Damage to morale	The street-fighter leader The callous leader The compulsive leader The paranoid leader The incompetent leader The codependent leader The busybody leader The intemperate leader The passive-aggressive leader

**Culture change must occur within the army before toxic leadership can be eradicated.** An analysis of this theme focused on what the Army is doing to eradicate

toxic leadership from within its ranks. Outcomes from this theme align with some of the findings done in previous research, surveys, and professional writings. Most importantly, a shift in the Army's culture must occur before a serious reduction in negative leadership can occur. Elle (2012) noted that the military's current culture, with its overriding emphasis on results and its macho "suck it up" attitudes, is a breeding ground for toxic leadership. Additionally, Elle stated that a toxic leader's boss is a factor in sustaining his toxic behavior; the boss ignores the negative behavior in the name of productivity because of the leader's tendency to achieve short-term results. Box (2012) argued for implementing a more effective leadership culture for current and future generations entering the military. He stated that this could be achieved through a rigorous leadership indoctrination while leaders are in training.

All participants agreed that culture change is needed but stressed that it would be a challenge and take time. They also agreed that eradicating toxic leaders altogether is an unrealistic goal. Major Blue stated: "These toxic types are the real problem...how are you going to get rid of them when the Army seems to be full of them?" Hence, participants concurred that creating any real change in the Army will be a challenge. This is because problems such as nepotism and favoritism are contributing factors that help prevent any real change. Major Grey: "Our toxic leader of a boss managed to work himself out of his job and get fired while we were in Iraq... Instead of removing him from the Army altogether, the Army gave him an excellent assignment in Jordan. When word got back to us, we felt as if the guy got promoted instead of being relieved."

Some participants from this current study felt that eradication of toxic leadership from the Army begins by working with the toxic leaders themselves and helping them to

change. Specifically, two of the five participants from this study argued that “detoxifying” toxic leaders through self-examining training, mentoring, and retraining should be considered. Major Green indicated that “It is not a matter of weeding them out, because it is unrealistic...If we go back in history, toxic leaders have always been around...However, it is a matter of how we deal with them and how to recognize it and at the same time address it as perpetual professional development”. SFC White’s answer was parallel to Major Green’s views, though she focused mainly on how the Army trains its leaders. SFC White, “Simply put, re-evaluate how we grow, teach, and train our leaders.” This is similar to the view of Williams (2005), who recommended that the Army eradicate toxic leaders through leading, coaching, training, and teaching in a responsible, honest, non-toxic manner. She argued that this type of development is the best way to combat toxic leadership in the Army.

Two of the three remaining participants in the current study argued for reassessing and replacing the Army’s Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation System. One participant, Major Blue, suggested a systematic 360-degree style evaluation design for all leaders in which subordinates would have an opportunity to give constructive feedback about a leader’s performance. In addition, Major Blue proposed that using feedback from the survey could influence the leader’s promotion or future assignments.

Likewise, Bullis and Reed (2003) found that there was a need for a new evaluation process in order to identify destructive leaders and at the same time emphasize leadership self-development. They went on to propose a new evaluation system that considers the views of subordinates. They further stressed that implementation of a new

evaluation should be phased in over time and should include considerable professional dialog, review, and revision to ensure that it is the appropriate tool.

In this connection, results from this current study show that the Army's 360-degree evaluation system is promising, but since implementation (as of early 2015) is still happening, it is unclear how effective it will be. The Army (2014) also conceived and is currently implementing the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback/ 360 (MSAF/360). MSAF/360 is a web-based individual leadership self-assessment tool that focuses on increasing self-awareness. Specifically, the MSAF/360 assessment provides input to the rated leader from superiors, peers, and subordinates that becomes the foundation for feedback and evaluation. Additionally, results from the assessment are provided only to the targeted leader in order to maintain confidentiality. MSAF/360 Coaches (retired senior leaders) are used to facilitate interpretation of the feedback. After internalizing the results, the leader develops a plan to act on the feedback. Essentially, MSAF/360 helps every leader in the Army through improved self-awareness and enhanced personal development and promotes better performance from all leaders. The Army views this program an adequate way to solicit anonymous feedback about leaders with the hope it will promote their personal self-assessment and continue to enhance their leadership quality.

Major Red, another participant in this study, recommended creating a web-based command climate survey tool: a virtual place where subordinates within a command could anonymously log in and fill out a series of organizational morale-oriented questions without fear of reprisals. Additionally, Major Red suggested a submenu of questions that could be available to target each key leader position within the command. He added that

once there was a sufficient amount of data gathered, the Army could use this information to assess the overall climate of the organization. Comparably, Ulmer, (2012) indicated that the Army should institute a system for periodically reporting the results of command climate surveys. He stressed that battalion and brigade level organizations, as well as staff sections at the Division and Corps level, are the primary targets for these standardized climate assessments. Lastly, Ulmer states that doing Army command climate surveys at the soldier's convenience using a systematic program will provide the Army with advance warning of toxic leadership in an organization.

**Measures put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective.** Two participants in this study agreed that measures that the Army has put in place to address toxic leadership are not effective. They felt that competent leaders suffer while toxic leaders continue to thrive and achieve rank. Major Grey: "I really don't know how they would weed them out. I wish they would. My own worry is that the toxic leaders will not be weeded out, but they will weed out the...competent leaders." Major Blue: "They just keep promoting those folks while the rest of us who work hard find ourselves being passed over for promotion." Concurring with these assessments, Ulmer (2012) stated that it takes a very strong and keen boss to identify a subordinate as toxic and take action to remove them. In addition, he noted that action to remove toxic leaders took effect only after a public manifestation forced an investigation that revealed toxic leadership as the problem. It is important to add that Ulmer (2012) wrote that the U.S. Army is reluctant to confront toxic leadership directly. He pointed out that the Army puts faith in incremental adjustments to educate, train, and develop processes to address toxic leadership but manifests little urgency to act systematically. Reed (2014) argued that measures in place

against toxic leadership are not effective because senior leaders in the Army fail to act. According to Reed, support from senior leaders in addressing the problem with some originality is vital for eradication of toxic leadership. Personnel policies could be an important control point for dealing with toxic leaders.

The findings of this dissertation research will contribute to continued awareness of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army and its impact on morale. The study shows the direct impact of toxic leaders on soldier morale, career choices, and emotional stability. Over a decade ago, Reed (2004) wrote that toxic leadership has a cumulative effect of demotivation on Army morale, adding that this posed a major concern and needed addressing. Sadly but unsurprisingly given subsequent research surveyed in chapter 3, this study discovered that not the problem of toxic leadership continues to pose a severe problem for Army morale.

The effects of toxic leadership revealed in this study will assist Army leaders in developing solutions to solve this problem. Specifically, the results of this study can offer senior ranks an enhanced awareness of the impact of toxic leadership and help them to increase quality control and intervention. In addition, the findings from this study will enhance scholarship by expanding the foundational work on the effects of toxic leadership. Although all participants in this study felt that completely ridding the Army's ranks of toxic leadership is an unrealistic goal, they also agreed that the Army could start addressing the issue of destructive leadership by implementing introspective leadership development training at all ranks. In this way, the toxic leadership problem could be contained to some degree.

The driving force that compelled this researcher to conduct the present study was several traumatic events directly linked to toxic leaders. In the final years of the researcher's career, he endured several years of having to work for toxic leaders. Specifically, from 2005 through 2010, the researcher worked for a series of toxic bosses one after another. The first irony of the researcher's situation was that the toxic command climate was so bad at his unit in 2005 that in 2006, he decided to volunteer for combat duty in Iraq. The researcher, now in greater physical danger, found himself assigned to a unit that had serious toxic leadership issues of its own. Furthermore, the researcher returned to his organization in 2008 only to find a new group of toxic bosses in charge. As a result, four months after his return from a second combat tour, the researcher was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Additionally, with the loss of one of his parents that same year on top of working in a toxic environment, which aggravated his PTSD diagnosis, the researcher's morale had collapsed. Matsuda's (2010) study reminds us that while toxic leaders were not a direct result in the suicides of soldiers it was a contributing factor. By 2009, the very Army the researcher once loved became a toxic nightmare that drove him to consider suicide as an option. Fortunately, the researcher did seek the proper help and later retired. The researcher's traumatic journey was an extreme example of the impact toxic leaders has on the morale of soldiers.

According to this researcher, there has been a tendency to abuse the leadership privilege by excusing toxic behavior as being "tough" or having an "old school" mentality. Unfortunately, toxic behavior disguised as toughness does not make for good leadership; the reverse is true. As shown in the literature and in the present dissertation

study, toxic leaders lack empathy and in this way harm their subordinates and undermine morale. Moreover, as indicated in this study, their poisonous impact can last long after they have left the organization.

### **Limitations**

**Generalizability.** The results of this study should be viewed with caution due to the small sample size. Although smaller sample sizes might be an additional limitation of any IPA study, Smith et al (2009) argued that reduced participant numbers allow for a richer exploration than might be possible with a larger sample. The decision not to increase the number of participants (to, say, ten) was made consciously in order to achieve a deeper and richer interruptive analysis in this first exploration—though additional IPA studies with larger sample sizes would of course be very useful. Despite these general limitations, the researcher confidently applied the findings to the entire population based on a well-designed data sample.

**Limited data from body language.** Facial expressions and body language, like voice inflections, could have strengthened the researcher's understanding of response to toxic leadership questions during emotionally charged parts of the interviews. However, due to geographic constraints, four of the five interviews took place over Skype VOIP without the video function, providing only audio recordings. Although there were limited personal interactions, the researcher was able to rely on the interview transcripts; the researcher's own written reflections, and vocal inflections captured in the recorded interviews for a more nuanced analysis.

## **Recommendations**

This study confirms that toxic leadership impacts soldier morale in multiple ways, including potential links to depression and suicidal ideation. A continuation of the study could further explore whether suicidal ideation and depression are directly linked to toxic command climates. This would be a basic test of the present study's validity and reliability. Moreover, given the current suicide rate in the Army, new studies on toxic leadership and its relationship to suicide are likely to be published possibly altering the Army's views on toxic leadership and leading to a more immediate change.

A further study could explore and develop a toxic leadership awareness campaign, using the results from this study as well as past research to train all Army personnel on the issue. The study would seek to discover to what extent all ranks were able to acquire and understand the skills taught by an awareness campaign as well as its direct effect on the soldiers' acquisition and implementation. Another additional study could examine the types of training each rank and skill level would receive in the Army as their career progresses. In addition, the study could explore all ranks' attitudes about what they need in the way of skills and knowledge in reference to toxic leadership.

The Army must make stopping toxic leaders a priority. As noted, participants in this study indicated that the eradication of toxic leaders is unrealistic. However, in order for the Army to deter seriously toxic leaders, a culture change must occur. Initiatives such as MSAF/360 are a good start but are only one part of the solution. Achieving real change in the Army will happen only through a cognitive shift in thinking about how it deals with toxic leaders. The current process is simply to investigate them and if any wrongdoing is substantiated they are reprimanded and (or) fired from their position;

however, as noted by the participants, the supposed reprimands or dismissals often amount to very little or simply do not occur because higher-ranking officers are avoiding embarrassment or protecting a favorite.

Army leaders at all levels must become agents for culture change. This study together with the already existing literature indicate three core components to this change, which must advance side by side:

- training the force at all levels to recognize and understand toxic leadership as a systemic (institutional) as well as an individual or unit-wide problem;
- providing subordinates with secure channels through which they can report incidences of toxic leadership and ensuring that these reports are seriously reviewed and addressed; and
- recognizing and “detoxifying” toxic leaders via perpetual retraining, mentoring, and behavior modification.

One advantage the Army has in this difficult threefold task is that it is a leadership-based organization in which many subordinates grow to become leaders. Unlike in most civilian organizations, higher-ranking leaders are not hired horizontally into senior roles; rather, they must progress upward through the ranks. In turn, leaders continue their development through mandatory training as well as emulating successful leaders.

The participants were the centerpieces of this study. However, a recommended qualitative study would be to interview a sample group of perceived toxic leaders. Doing this could give insight as to how and why toxic leaders are who they are. Perhaps an organization (military or non-military) could use this as a developmental tool. This study would be confidential in nature. Candidates who are identified as toxic leaders would be

encouraged by their bosses to agree to participate in the study as an alternative to disciplinary action, reprimand, or even termination. Moreover, soliciting candidates could be achieved if a study like this was a part of that toxic leader's rehabilitation and development plan. As an incentive to participate in the study, the toxic leader's boss might withhold disciplinary action or might advocate that their record be subsequently purged of any bad performance information. Findings from this qualitative study could be used to create countermeasures for training supervisors and subordinates on what do when dealing with toxic leaders.

Lastly, the sample size of five retired Army personnel is, obviously, a minuscule proportion of the entire population of the U.S. Army, active and retired. Therefore, an additional study with a larger sample size would ensure appropriate generalization of the findings of the study. The recommendation for future studies is first to double the sample size from five to ten participants in order to increase the enriched data using an IPA. The ten participants should include active military personnel. Continued research studies such as the one conducted for this dissertation is imperative to ensure continuing improvement of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army. A final recommendation is that doing continuous replications of this study could establish trends in toxic leadership and its impact on morale.

## **Conclusions**

Research studies by Box (2012); Bullis and Reed (2003); Doty and Fenlason (2012); Elle (2012); Goldman (2006); Lipman-Blumen (2006); Matsuda (2010); Mehta & Maheshwari (2014); Schmidt, (2014); Steele (2011); Ulmer (2012); Williams (2005); and Zellers, Tepper and Duffy (2002) have provided convincing proof that toxic leadership is

a serious problem that affects morale in in the U.S. Army as well as other organizations. ADP (2012) states that toxic leaders will in fact impair the subordinates' initiative, which in turn destroys morale of the organization.

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine toxic leadership through the experiences of five former Army personnel in order to discover 1) how toxic leadership happens, 2) why the Army tolerates its existence, and 3) gauge the effect of toxic leaders on the morale of the Army. As a result, the researcher posed two questions to guide this study. What impact does toxic leadership have on morale of individual soldiers? What is the Army doing to address and eradicate toxic leadership from within its ranks?

This IPA yielded first-hand accounts of toxic leadership and perceptions of the impact toxic leaders have on organization and individual morale. Moreover, the support of this analysis to be found in other studies and professional articles on the subject add to our understanding and thus provide a better foundation for action to continue deal with this issue.

This research contributes to continued awareness of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army and its impact on morale. The implications of specific impacts toxic leadership has from this study will assist Army senior leadership in continued awareness that the issue still exists and that more solutions needs to be made to deal with this phenomenon. In addition, this study will enhance scholarship by providing a continued foundation on the effects of toxic leadership. While all participants in this study felt that ridding the Army's ranks of toxic leadership is impossible, they also agreed that a way to start addressing destructive leadership in the army would be to educate all ranks on leadership

development. Finally, all participants added that it was important to create an environment that could contain toxic leadership to some degree.

The results of this study should be viewed with caution due to its small sample size. Although smaller sample sizes might be an additional limitation of IPA study, reduced participant numbers allows for a richer depth of analysis. Therefore, it was the conscious decision of this researcher not to increase the number of participants to maintain a proper and enriched analysis. Although four of the five interviews took place through audio-only Skype, the researcher was able to rely on the interview transcripts, the researcher's own written reflections, and the recorded interviews for enriched data responses. In a new study, facial expressions, body language, and voice inflections could reinforce understanding of participant responses to toxic leadership questions during emotionally charged parts of the interviews.

The recommendations following this study outline an Army-wide toxic leadership awareness campaign. With the results from this study and past research, the Army can train its personal on all facets of this destructive form of leadership. Moreover, the study would seek to discover to what extent all ranks were able to acquire and understand the skills taught by this proposed toxic leadership awareness campaign. The campaign would be holistic in nature, but soldiers would receive training that is rank and skill level appropriate training as they progresses in their career. Additional IPA studies with a larger sample size can ensure a rich appropriate generalization of the findings of the study along with continued research studies on improvement of toxic leadership awareness in the U.S. Army. Replication of this study should be continuous to establish trends because of studying toxic leadership and its impact on morale.

This dissertation study adds new findings and insight to the destructive nature of toxic leadership and the impact it has on morale in the Army. It is vital for all soldiers and leaders in the U.S. Army to understand this phenomenon, identify it, take steps to transform or remove toxic leaders, and foster non-toxic environments by continuing to teach, mentor and build cohesive well-disciplined formations.

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## Appendix A

### Letters to Participants

I am Joseph Asbery, Doctoral candidate, from St. John Fisher College Doctoral in Executive Leadership. The purpose of this letter is to thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be interviewed for this case study.

The purpose of this study is to advance knowledge and awareness of negative leadership in the US Army. Your participation in this research will allow me to examine what negative leadership means to you as well as to add to the current research that has already been done on this phenomenon.

Essentially, this case study seeks to better understand the nature of negative leadership in the Army and the effect it has on the morale of former US Army members like you. Moreover, this study seeks advance knowledge that amplify awareness of negative leadership in the US ARMY Army by way of your first-hand accounts to amplify the possible impacts of negative leaders. Finally, this study will perhaps articulate a deeper understanding of what negative leadership is, its possible origins, and how the Army plans on to eradicate it.

During this whole process I will be the principal investigator for this study, and I can be reached at [ja3388@sjfc.edu](mailto:ja3388@sjfc.edu) or at 347-459-6812.

Your participation in this research will done by interview with a list of semi structured questions that I will ask you. The interview will be recorded using a digital recorder and notes will be taken during your interview.

Interviews will be conducted face to face if possible and recorded using a voice recorder device. If a face to face interview is not an option multimedia such as Skype messenger or teleconferencing will be utilized.

These are the interview questions I will ask you:

1. In your own terms, what does negative or toxic leadership mean?
2. What impact do you think negative leadership has on the Army?
3. Did you ever consider departing /leaving the Army because of your supervisor's leadership style? Please explain what happened?
4. When you reflect on your Army career, are there any events that stand out in your mind? If yes please explain.
5. There have been a lot of reports in the media recently about "toxic leaders." Do you agree that they should be weeded out? If so, how do you feel the Defense Department can weed out these types of leaders?
6. What lasting effect did your negative experience had (if any) on your morale while in U.S Army?

Your interview will be transcribed verbatim (word for word) before being analyzed by me. Once transcribed you will be given a copy of the transcribed interview for your purusal and I will make any changes to ensure what you said matches to what is been transcribed.

Upon completion of this study all digital recordings, emails and transcripts will be destroyed.

The following measures will be taken to protect your identity:

1. Your actual name, and the names of people you mention in your interview, will be replaced with a pseudonym. (An example would be if your name is "*Major Joseph Asbery*" it will be changed to "*Major Blue*" moreover this pseudonym will only known to you individually. Other participants in this study will not know your name either)
2. Names and locations of military facilities and organizational data you were affiliated with will be generalized. (For example instead of saying *Fort Bragg, North Carolina* I would say "*a military base in the southern United States*") In this example the fact that military, as a whole, has over 100 facilities located in the southeren region of the United States will make it difficult for anyone to compromise your identity. <http://militarybases.com/>
3. Upon completion of this study all digital recordings, emails and transcripts will be destroyed.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. If you agree to particpate, I will also provide you with a consent form that you will be asked to sign before being interviewed.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely

Mr. Joseph Asbery, MPA  
Candidate, Ed.D in Executive Leadership  
Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education  
St. John Fisher College  
347-459-6812  
[Ja3388@sjfc.edu](mailto:Ja3388@sjfc.edu)

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

St. John Fisher College  
Institutional Review Board

### Informed Consent Form

**Title of study:** An exploratory study of negative leadership in the US Army: What is the impact on morale on US Army personnel?

**Name(s) of researcher(s):** Joseph Asbery

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Janice **Phone for further information:** 347-459-6812

**Purpose of study:** This case study seeks to better understand the nature of negative leadership in the Army and the effect it had on your morale as a former US Army member. Moreover, this study seeks advance knowledge and awareness of negative Leadership in the US Army by way of your first and accounts

**Study Procedures:** Your interview will take 30 to 60 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. I encourage you to answer all of the questions as best as you can. However, you may choose to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Your participation in this research will be conducted by interview using a list of semi structured questions. If a face to face interview is not an option multimedia such as Skype messenger or teleconferencing will be utilized. The interview will be recorded using a digital recorder and written notes will be taken during the interviews.

These are the interview questions I will ask you:

1. In your own terms, what does negative or toxic leadership mean?
2. What impact do you think negative leadership has on the Army?
3. Did you ever consider departing /leaving the Army because of your supervisor's leadership style? Please explain what happened?
4. When you reflect on your Army career, are there any events that stand out in your mind? If yes please explain.
5. There have been a lot of reports in the media recently about "toxic leaders." Do you agree that they should be weeded out? If so, how do you feel the Defense Department can weed out these types of leaders?
6. What lasting effect did your negative experience had (if any) on your morale while in U.S Army?

Upon completion if the interview your interview will be transcribed verbatim (word for word) before being analyzed by me. Once transcribed you will be given a copy of the transcribed interview for your perusal and I will make any changes to ensure what you said matches to what is been transcribed.

Upon completion of this study all digital recordings, emails and transcripts will be destroyed.

**Approval of study:** This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Place of study:** On location/via Skype or Telephone conference

**Length of participation:** 30-60 minutes

**Risks and benefits:** The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

**No risks or discomforts are anticipated from taking part in this study. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can skip that question or withdraw from the study altogether.** You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data generated as a consequence of your participation will be destroyed. Recording device that will be used for the study will be stored in a locked cabinet. Upon completion of this study all digital recordings, emails and transcripts will be destroyed.

**Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:** All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and, unless you specifically indicate your consent, your actual name will **NOT** appear in any report or publication of the research.

\_\_\_\_\_ As a participant in this study, I consent to my actual full name being used in any report or publications of the research.

\_\_\_\_\_ As a participant in this study, I **DO NOT** consent to my actual full name being used in any report or publications of the research.

**Your rights:**

As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.

4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, which might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

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Print Name (Participant)      Signature      Date

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Print Name (Participant)      Signature      Date

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Print Name (Investigator)      Signature      Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above for appropriate referrals.

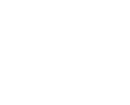
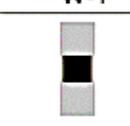
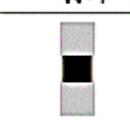
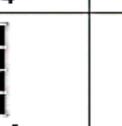
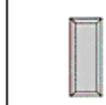
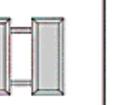
## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. In your own terms, what does negative or toxic leadership mean?
2. What impact do you think negative leadership has on the Army?
3. Did you ever consider departing /leaving the Army because of your supervisor's leadership style? Please explain what happened?
4. When you reflect on your Army career, are there any events that stand out in your mind? If yes please explain.
5. There have been a lot of reports in the media recently about "toxic leaders." Do you agree that they should be weeded out? If so, how do you feel the Defense Department can weed out these types of leaders?
6. What lasting effect did your experience on your morale while in U.S Army?

## Appendix D

### U.S. Army Ranks

CATEGORY	Insignia of the United States Army						
<b>ENLISTED</b> (Green and Gold)	E-1	E-2	E-3	E-4		E-5	E-6
							
	no insignia Private	Private	Private 1st Class	Corporal	Specialist	Sergeant	Staff Sergeant
<b>WARRANT OFFICER</b> (Silver and Black)	E-7		E-8		E-9		
							
	Sergeant 1st Class		Master Sergeant		1st Sergeant		Sergeant Major
<b>COMPANY AND FIELD GRADE OFFICER</b> (Gold and Silver)	W-4		W-5				
							
	Warrant Officer		Chief Warrant Officer		Chief Warrant Officer		Chief Warrant Officer
<b>GENERAL OFFICER</b> (Silver)	W-1	W-2	W-3	W-4	W-5		
							
	Warrant Officer	Chief Warrant Officer	Chief Warrant Officer	Chief Warrant Officer	Master Warrant Officer		
<b>GENERAL OFFICER</b> (Silver)	0-1	0-2	0-3	0-4	0-5	0-6	
							
	(gold) 2nd Lieutenant	(silver) 1st Lieutenant	(silver) Captain	(gold) Major	(silver) Lieutenant Colonel	(silver) Colonel	
<b>GENERAL OFFICER</b> (Silver)	0-7	0-8	0-9	0-10		0-11	
							
	Brigadier General	Major General	Lieutenant General	General		General of the Army	

## Appendix E

### U.S. Army Chain of Command

