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# How toxic leaders are perceived: gender and information-processing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to study gender-based differences in information-processing impact on message perception, leading to women viewing the behavior of potentially toxic leaders more negatively than they are viewed by men.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In total, 381 participants completed a series of measures of cue recognition items, collusion and conformity pertaining to a hypothetical toxic leadership scenario.

**Findings** – Results indicated that women perceived the toxic leader more negatively than men, elaborating more on negative message connotations, while men emphasized positives. Likewise, men recorded higher scores on their tendency to collude with the toxic leader compared to women. Evidence was also found that participants were more attuned to negative messages and behavior from a leader of the same gender.

**Research limitations/implications** – The Anglo-Celtic dominance of the sample is identified as a potential limitation. Further research exploring how not only gender, but age and cultural differences impact on how leaders are perceived is also proposed.

**Practical implications** – From a management standpoint understanding that men and women process information differently has worth in assisting in organizations more effectively structuring their intra-organizational communications. Gender-specific communications may help to offset perceptions of negativity toward leaders.

**Originality/value** – This study is the first to consider how gender-based information-processing differences may influence whether a leader is perceived as toxic by male and female followers. It also suggests that gender interaction effects may be critical when considering how leaders, particularly toxic leaders, are viewed by employees.

**Keywords** Gender, Information-processing, Selectivity hypothesis, Toxic leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The qualities that characterize an effective leader have been the focus of substantial scholarly attention (e.g. Muchiri *et al.*, 2011; Palmer *et al.*, 2001). However, what happens when leaders fail to embody these qualities? Only relatively recently has the harmful side of leadership become a focus of academic inquiry. Harmful leaders have been found to have negative effects on organizational outcomes, employee morale and motivation (Pelletier, 2010; Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). Yet does responsibility for harmful or toxic leadership rest solely with the leader? Padilla *et al.* (2007) suggested that toxic leadership is a confluence of the leader, the followers, (defined as either "colluders" or "conformers") and the environment that facilitates it – the "Toxic Triangle."

Whether female and male followers employ similar criteria on which to base their perception of a leader as toxic has not been explored. However, information interpretation has been found to differ based on gender, with men focussing on overall message themes and women engaging in more detailed processing (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Referred to as the Selectivity hypothesis (Putrevu, 2001), this detailed processing may lead women to viewing toxic leaders more negatively than men.



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This paper posits that inherent differences in how men and women process information will impact on the perception and interpretation of a message from a toxic leader, leading to women viewing the leader more negatively. Second, it is proposed that due to these processing differences male followers will be more likely to show characteristics with being colluders while women will be more likely to show characteristics consistent with those of conformers.

## Literature review

### *Destructive and toxic leadership*

Harmful or destructive leadership may be seen as comprising six forms: abusive (Tepper, 2000), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), destructive (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007), bullying (Namie and Namie, 2000), laissez-faire (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007) and, of note to this study, toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Lipman-Blumen (2005) stated that leadership toxicity can be manifested as direct attacks on followers' personalities, characters, abilities and emotional stability (Kellerman, 2004). Examples of toxic characteristics can include the leader criticizing employees' performance, using employee's ideas as their own and humiliating employees in front of colleagues (Kellerman, 2004). However, it is how these behaviors are perceived by the follower that determines whether the leader is viewed as toxic. One follower's interpretation of a toxic leader may be another follower's interpretation of a successful leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). It is the interaction of leaders, followers and the environment that leads to leadership toxicity, a perspective Padilla *et al.* (2007) termed the "Toxic Triangle."

*The toxic leader*. Toxic leaders have been characterized as having a predisposed ideology of hate, high levels of narcissism/charisma, a personalized need for power and negative life themes. For example, Hitler was driven by his need for power at the expense of minority groups. He was able to articulate his visions clearly and recruit followers in part due to his charisma (Lepsius, 2006). The mistreatment he received from his father may have facilitated his development of negative life themes and ideology of hatred (Montefiore, 2004). Each element appears a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a leader to be toxic. For example, a hate-filled individual lacking charisma may be driven by grandiose dreams but unable to communicate or recruit followers and therefore not be able to achieve and maintain a leadership position (Padilla *et al.*, 2007).

*The followers*. Less well studied than the leaders, the role the follower plays in toxic leadership is pivotal (Lord and Brown, 2004). Weierter (1997) suggested that it is important to distinguish between two types of followers; those who lack self-worth and identity, referred to as "conformers" and those who identify and share a toxic leader's goals, visions and ambitions, or "colluders" (Padilla *et al.*, 2007).

The conformers. Conformers will generally go along with a toxic leader, but not for their own benefit or gain. Padilla *et al.* (2007) suggested that those who conform to toxic leaders are characterized by low psychological maturity, unmet needs and low core self-evaluations (CSE). Individuals who are psychologically less mature have been found to be more susceptible to conform to authority (Milgram, 1974). Conformers hold limited faith in their abilities, and tend to believe they deserve to be treated with disrespect. In response they seek belonging and acceptance from their organizations and leaders. Conformers may also often share feelings of emptiness and alienation from mainstream society (Shamir *et al.*, 1994). These characteristics create a context where, irrespective of whether the conformer agrees with the values or position of the toxic leader, they still follow.

The colluders. In contrast to conformers, colluders see potential for opportunity by following a toxic leader. As Offerman (2004) asserted, "Although destructive leadership creates negative outcomes for organizations, some [individual] members might prosper" (p. 56). Colluders tend to share the same negative values as the leader and, as such, are willing to implement and support the leader's agendas (Offerman, 2004). In the aftermath of the Enron collapse, it became apparent that many Enron employees assisted top management to implement illegal and immoral business ventures (Fusaro and Miller, 2002). Many of these employees were driven by their own ambition, as well as the toxic charisma exhibited by Enron executives, seeing the potential for their own gain (Petrick and Scherer, 2003).

*The toxic environment*. The final element is the conducive environment. Although not a focus of this study, the toxic environment has been characterized by four factors: instability, a perceived level of threat, disregard for cultural and ethical values and an absence of checks and balances within organizational policies (Padilla *et al.*, 2007).

*Gender and information processing*

Research on gender in organizations has centered on issues such as role stereotyping, the glass-ceiling effect and gender-based workplace discrimination (Eagly, 2005). The organizational implications of men and women perceiving information differently based on their gender has received less attention. However, it is possible that the gender of followers may influence how they perceive leaders who may be toxic. The selectivity hypothesis (Putrevu, 2001) posits that women are more elaborate processors of information (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Chang, 2007; Edwards and La Ferle, 2009). Elaborate processing leads to greater imagery creation, making the source as important as the information itself. Men in contrast tend to be more heuristic processors, focussing on the overall theme of the message (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991).

It also means women are highly attuned to inconsistencies in information presented, being more accurate in identifying false or subtly incongruent cues. Men, in contrast, being heuristic processors, tend to not be as attuned to identifying information that may be subtly incongruent from the rest of the message. Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991) and Reder (1987) suggested two strategies are employed for assessing recognition – "detailed" and "schema-based." The detailed strategy, akin to elaborate processing, involves an in-depth memory search for items that do not match a message. This approach results in high accuracy but requires a lot of cognitive effort. The schema-based strategy, or heuristic processing, is less effortful but less precise in identifying subtle differences in message content. The selectivity hypothesis implies that differential perception of a toxic leader's communications based on the follower's gender may exist. In order to assess the applicability of the selectivity hypothesis to identify gender differences in perceptions of toxic leaders we proposed the following hypotheses:

*H1*. Women as more detailed information processors will identify more false congruent cues about a situation involving a toxic leader than men.

*H2*. There will be no gender differences in the number of highly incongruent cues identified about a situation involving a toxic leader.

*H3*. Women will identify more false cues in a situation involving a toxic leader that are subtly inconsistent with the message.

The tendency women may have toward detailed information processing has a further implication. As detailed processors, women have been found to place greater emphasis on negative information due to its greater salience. In contrast, men have been found to place more value on positive information due to a self-oriented perspective characteristic of heuristic processors (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990). Accordingly, women may be more likely to interpret messages from a toxic leader negatively. This leads us to the fourth hypothesis of the study:

*H4.* Women will perceive a toxic leader more negatively than men will perceive them.

Furthermore, at the organizational level we may see gender associations with whether a follower is either a colluder or a conformer to a toxic leader (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). Again drawing from the selectivity hypothesis, more women may show a tendency to conform and "toe the line" with, rather than actively support, toxic leaders due to their focus on negative, highly salient information. Conversely, men may be more likely to exhibit behaviors consistent with colluders, given their thematic processing of information, attention to positives and search for personal self-advantage. (Levin and Gaeth, 1988; Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Putrevu, 2001). This leads us to propose the next two hypotheses:

*H5.* Women will record significantly higher scores for conformity compared to men.

*H6.* Men will record significantly higher scores for collusion compared to women.

*Toxic leadership, gender and trust*

Leader-follower trust has been found to positively influence employee performance, organizational commitment and employee morale, reducing staff turnover and absenteeism (Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010; Joseph and Winston, 2005). However, how may a leader's toxicity impact on the trust they elicit among followers? More specifically, whether a follower' gender influences the level of trust they may have for a toxic leader has not been well-researched (Jeanquart-Barone, 1993). Of note is the potential interaction that may occur between leaders and followers of the same gender. Intragender competition has suggested that individuals, due to rivalry for mate selection, have a predisposition toward viewing members of the same-sex as competition (Buss, 1988). Individuals may display a cognitive bias against members of the same sex, which may result in individuals being more attuned to communications from the same gender, provoking feelings of anxiety, threat and jealousy (Maner *et al.*, 2009). This may influence how followers view leaders of the same-sex, with communications from a toxic leader of the same gender being subjected to greater scrutiny and perceived more negatively. This line of inquiry leads us to the final hypothesis of the study:

*H7.* Both men and women will identify more false cues that are subtly inconsistent from toxic leaders of the same gender.

## Method

*Participants*

In total, 381 employed participants aged 18-65 years of age completed an online questionnaire focussed around a hypothetical leadership scenario. Employment was essential to allow for the scenarios to have participant relevance. Participants were gathered from two sources: 179 from a random participant database generated by the online survey tool "Survey Monkey,"as well as 202 random participants accessed via social media web site Facebook. In total, 395 respondents completed the survey.

However, analysis of missing data identified 14 cases that were considered unacceptable due to high levels of missing data, leaving a total usable sample of 381.

61.9 percent of the sample were female, with 38.1 percent male, 18.2 percent of the sample were aged 18-25 years of age, 22.9 percent aged 26-32 years, 21.5 percent aged 33-40 years, while 16.0 percent were aged 41-48. Finally, 12.1 percent were aged 49-55 with 9.4 percent aged 56 years or older. The majority of respondents were Australian (87.3 percent), with 12.7 percent of participants from overseas. The dominance of the sample by Anglo-Celtic Australians may be considered a potential limitation, with differing cultural views on leadership not able to be explored.

*Instrument pre-testing: Collusion and conformity scales*

Conformity items were based on the characteristics of conformers outlined by Padilla *et al.*, (2007). Attributes of unmet needs, low CSE and low maturity were used as guiding criteria. Items from Judge *et al.*'s (1997) CSE scale were adapted. Selection of items for the collusion scale followed the same process. As ambition was identified as a central trait of colluders, collusion items were drawn from the Ambition sub-scale of the Hogan Personality Inventory (Hogan and Hogan, 2001). Based on its association with charisma, the Hypomanic Traits of Exhibitionism Scale (Goldberg *et al.*, 2006), was also used to inform collusion items. Wording of the items in both scales was modified to reflect a leadership context.

*Construct validity and reliability assessment: conformity scale*. Construct validity of both scales was tested via exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Principal axis extraction with oblique rotation was employed. Initial analyses for the scale were appropriate (KMO = 0.803; Bartlett's $p < 0.001$). A total of three factors were extracted, explaining 56.81 percent of the total variance. Although analysis was not conducted at the factorial level, interpretation of these factors resulted in factor 1 representing "lack of self-confidence," while factor 2 appeared to focus on an employee's "individual assurance" and factor 3 reflected an employee's "managerial alignment." One item was removed due to cross-loading. The final conformity scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$).

*Construct validity and reliability assessment: collusion scale*. Again, initial analyses were promising (KMO = 0.852; Bartlett's $p < 0.001$). One item cross-loaded across factors and was removed from further analysis. The EFA resolved in four factors which explained 63.6 percent of the total variance. Factor 1 represented "employee ambition," while factor 2 indicated "workplace harmony." Examination of factor 3 appeared to reflect "career ambivalence," while interpretation of items loading on factor 4 suggested "self-interest." The collusion scale demonstrated appropriate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$).

*Instrument: main study*

*Scenario development – recognition*. Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991) found that differences in processing strategies between men and women could be discerned through the use of scenarios that included recognition tasks that varied in message cue congruity and incongruity. These tasks required individuals to search their memory for whether the information actually appeared in the scenario or were simply consistent with the theme. Singh and Churchill (1986) expanded this to include bogus or "foil" items within recognition tasks to reduce positive answer bias.

The scenario presented a hypothetical interaction between the respondent as a hospitality worker and the toxic behavior and attitudes of their manager. The scenario

vignette was based around the qualities of toxic leadership and how these qualities translate to actual situations. Respondents received one of six possible toxic leadership conditions in their scenario. These were either fully congruent, low incongruent or highly incongruent depending on the recognition cues included in the scenario, with the gender of the manager randomly assigned for each condition ("Janine" or "Brad"). Following Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991) the low and high incongruent scenarios contained six statements that were inconsistent with the toxic manager's personality and behavior toward their followers.

*Recognition task*. The recognition task comprised 15 "Yes/No" statements which respondents answered based on whether they believed the statement had appeared in the scenario. They comprised five statements that had directly appeared in the message (congruent), five statements that had not appeared in the message but were consistent with the theme and five items that went against the overall theme of the message (incongruent). These were subtle for the low incongruent condition and overt for the high incongruent condition.

*Procedure*

Participants were randomly assigned one of the six scenarios, with a cover page detailing instructions and a background to the study. To ensure responses for the recognition task were not influenced by repeat reading or checking, participants were not able to return to the scenario page once they had read it. Participants were asked to read the scenario and then respond to the recognition task, the conformity and collusion scales and finally demographic questions.

## Results

*H1*

*H1* proposed that women would recognize more cues that were consistent with the message theme, but not actually in the message (false congruent cues). A one way analysis of variance was conducted with a summated mean of the five false congruent cues employed as the dependent variable (Table I).

As anticipated women did identify less of the false full congruent cues as true statements from the scenario ($M_{\text{women}} = 1.76$ compared to $M_{\text{men}} = 1.92$). However, this difference was not statistically significant ($F = 0.81$ (1, 337); $p = 0.37$) with *H1* rejected.

*H2*

*H2* proposed that when incongruity of the false cues was high (i.e. when statements in the scenario clearly did not match the overall theme) that men's natural heuristic processing would be overridden. This would result in men and women identifying equivalent numbers of highly incongruent foils (Table II).

**Table I.** False congruent cue recognition by gender

| | | | False congruent cues recognized | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender of follower | | | *M* | SD | *n* |
| Female | | | 1.76 | 1.62 | 210 |
| Male | | | 1.92 | 1.54 | 129 |
| Total | | | 1.82 | 1.59 | 339 |
| | *SS* | df | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| False congruent cues | 2.06 | 1 | 2.06 | 0.81 | 0.37 |

No significant difference was found in the number of highly incongruent cues recognized by men and women ($F = 0.25$; $p = 0.62$). *H2* was therefore supported. Far more of the highly incongruent cues were identified compared to the false congruent cues by both men and women, suggesting all participants were engaging in a more comprehensive processing strategy when extremely inconsistent cues were presented (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991).

*H3*

*H3* assessed whether women would identify more of the low incongruent cues as going against the theme of the toxic scenario.

Table III indicates that women recognized significantly more of the low incongruent cues than men ($M_{women} = 4.75$; $M_{men} = 3.50$; $F = 53.89(1:118)$; $p < 001$). Accordingly, *H3* was supported. This finding is consistent with women employing a more detailed processing strategy which picks up more of the subtle cues when cue incongruity is only slightly inconsistent.

*H4*

*H4* proposed that women would view a toxic leader more negatively than men. To test, two items were included in the scenario assessment: "Brad/Janine can be described as a good and effective manager" and "You would describe Brad/Janine as an encouraging and motivating manager." These items were measured via a "yes/no" response. Contingency co-efficient ($\chi^2$) analysis was employed to identify any differences in the

**Table II.**
High incongruent cue recognition by gender

| | | | | High incongruent cues recognized | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender of follower | | | | *M* | SD | *n* |
| Female | | | | 4.56 | 0.77 | 72 |
| Male | | | | 4.63 | 1.01 | 60 |
| Total | | | | 4.59 | 0.89 | 130 |
| | *SS* | df | | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| High incongruent cues | 0.20 | 1 | | 0.20 | 0.25 | 0.62 |

**Table III.**
Low incongruent cue recognition by gender of follower and leader: main and interaction effects

| | | | | Mean sum of low congruent cues recognized | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender of follower | | Gender of leader | | *M* | SD |
| Female | | Female | | 5.06 | 0.83 |
| | | Male | | 4.44 | 1.18 |
| Total | | | | 4.75 | 1.05 |
| Male | | Female | | 3.14 | 0.74 |
| | | Male | | 3.92 | 0.76 |
| Total | | | | 3.50 | 0.84 |
| | *SS* | df | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| Gender of follower | 44.55 | 1 | 44.55 | 53.89 | < 0.001 |
| Gender of leader | 0.20 | 1 | 0.20 | 0.24 | 0.625 |
| Gender of follower X gender of leader | 14.69 | 1 | 14.69 | 17.77 | < 0.001 |
| Error | 97.54 | 118 | 0.83 | | |

number of men or women who agreed with each of the two statements. In addition, any potential interaction effect with the leader's gender was also examined.

Results indicated that the clear majority of participants (approximately 76 percent) did not agree with Brad or Janine being described as a good or effective manager. Despite this proportionally more men than women described Brad or Janine as a good and effective manager (47 men compared to 18 women). This difference was statistically significant (Contingency co-efficient = 0.325; $p < 0.001$). Likewise, Table IV indicates that the clear majority of respondents also did not view Brad or Janine as encouraging or motivating (74 percent). However, once again significantly more men (31.8 percent) than women (13.8 percent) identified the leader as being encouraging and motivating (contingency co-efficient = 0.211; $p < 0.001$). Accordingly general support for *H4* was found. An interaction effect was also evident for the male leader (Brad), with proportionally less men viewing him as encouraging and motivating when compared to Janine (contingency co-efficient = 0.120; $p < 0.118$).

*H5*

*H5* proposed that women would identify with elements of conformity, consistent with the conformers category of follower (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). An overall conformity variable was created by summating responses for the items in the conformity scale.

Women recorded slightly higher scores for overall conformity ($M_{\text{women}} = 48.05$; $M_{\text{men}} = 46.97$). However, this difference was not statistically significant ($F = 1.80$ (1:337); $p = 0.18$) with *H5* rejected.

*H6*

*H6* proposed that men would record higher scores on the collusion scale due to their heuristic, schema-based processing strategies and overall emphasis on positive information (Padilla *et al.*, 2007).

Table V indicates that men recorded higher overall scores than women for the collusion scale ($M_{\text{men}} = 41.80$; $M_{\text{women}} = 39.44$). This difference was found to be statistically significant ($F = 8.93$ (1:335); $p < 0.01$), supporting *H6*.

*H7*

*H7* assessed whether men and women would be more attuned to toxic communications from a leader of the same sex. *H7* was supported (refer to Table III). Women recognized more low incongruent cues in the scenario when the leader was a woman (Janine), while men recognized more when the leader was a man (Brad).

## Discussion

The central focus of the paper was to investigate whether gender-based information-processing differences would influence the way toxic leaders are perceived. It also examined whether they influence how negatively or otherwise the leader is viewed based on the gender of the follower.

*How leaders are perceived*

While it must be noted that the majority of participants viewed the leader in the scenario negatively, it was clear that women viewed toxic leaders significantly more negatively compared to men, irrespective of the gender of the leader (*H4*). Women's negative perceptions of toxic leaders may be indivisible of their processing strategies.

**Table IV.**
Perception of manager by gender of leader and follower

| | | "Effective manager" | | | | "Encouraging and motivating manager" | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manager | Gender of follower | Yes | Yes (%) | No | No (%) | Yes | Yes (%) | No | No (%) |
| Brad | Female | 12 | 10.9 | 98 | 89.1 | 19 | 17.3 | 91 | 82.7 |
| | Male | 22 | 37.9 | 36 | 62.1 | 16 | 27.6 | 42 | 72.4 |
| Janine | Female | 6 | 6.0 | 94 | 94.0 | 10 | 10.0 | 90 | 90.0 |
| | Male | 25 | 35.2 | 46 | 64.8 | 25 | 35.2 | 46 | 64.8 |
| Total | Female | 18 | 8.6 | 192 | 91.4 | 29 | 13.8 | 181 | 86.2 |
| | Male | 47 | 36.4 | 82 | 63.6 | 41 | 31.8 | 88 | 68.2 |
| | Total | 65 | 23.7 | 24 | 76.3 | 70 | 26.0 | 269 | 74.0 |
| | | Contingency Co-efficient | | $p$ | | Contingency Co-efficient | | $p$ | |
| | Brad | 0.305 | | $< 0.001$ | | 0.120 | | 0.118 | |
| | Janine | 0.350 | | $< 0.001$ | | 0.294 | | $< 0.001$ | |
| | Total | 0.325 | | $< 0.001$ | | 0.211 | | $< 0.001$ | |

Women's more comprehensive considerations of all message particulars makes them more likely than men to show sensitivity to message cues before rendering a judgment, amplifying negative perception (Lenney *et al.*, 1983). Conversely, men reported significantly higher agreement with viewing the toxic leader in the scenario as being "good and effective" and "encouraging and motivating." The underlying nature of schema-based processing places more emphasis on positive information and potentials for opportunity (Levin and Gaeth, 1988). Men, being heuristic processors, were therefore less influenced by any negative information (Edwards and La Ferle, 2009).

When a leader's behavior or communication was consistent throughout the scenario, men and women recalled similar numbers of cues, as thematic and detailed processing strategies work equally effectively (*H1*). Likewise, when presented with highly incongruent cues, recall was similar (*H2*). However, when faced with cues subtly different to the theme of the message, men recorded significantly fewer cues compared to women. These results are consistent with previous research on elaboration thresholds (e.g. Putrevu, 2001, 2004; Meyers-Levy, 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991) which all found no gender difference when specific cues command either little or notable attention. Low incongruence does not appear to prompt individuals toward a specific type of processing strategy and may not provide enough variation for people to adjust their innate processing tendencies (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Putrevu, 2001, 2004).

Accordingly, it appears that the mechanisms behind gender differences in information processing can be applied to explain reactions and perceptions of toxic managers and leaders. If men are schema-based processors, placing stronger emphasis on positive information, then how they perceive the toxic leader may differ markedly to women, who place higher importance on the negative connotations within a message (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Putrevu, 2001). This has implications not just for business organizations, but for leaders more generally, such as political candidates.

### *Intragender competition, leader toxicity and trust*

The gender of the toxic leader also clearly influenced the information processing tendencies of respondents. Specifically, a negative interaction was found between leaders and followers of the same gender (*H7*). Females identified more of the subtle false cues when the leader was female as opposed to male, with the same effect found for men. A greater salience toward toxic communications when the leader was the same gender as the follower appears to be the driver for this. Women were more attuned to toxic communications and subtleties when they were from a female toxic leader, and men more attuned to toxic communications when they were delivered from a male toxic leader.

Intragender competition has been proposed to drive perceptions of threat, anxiety and rivalry, resulting in a stronger salience in interactions with members of the same

| Gender of follower | Overall conformity scale responses | | | Overall collusion scale responses | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | SD | *n* | *M* | SD | *n* |
| Female | 48.05 | 6.18 | 210 | 39.44 | 6.16 | 210 |
| Male | 46.97 | 8.54 | 129 | 41.80 | 7.58 | 127 |
| Total | 47.64 | 7.17 | 339 | 40.33 | 7.09 | *337* |
| | *SS* | df | *MS* | *F* | *p* | |
| Conformity | 92.46 | 1 | 92.46 | 1.80 | 0.18 | |
| Collusion | 437.95 | 1 | 437.95 | 8.93 | < 0.01 | |

**Table V.** Conformity and collusion responses by gender

sex (Maner *et al.*, 2009; Dittmar and Howard, 2004). Since individuals of the same gender are potential competition, it has adaptive value to be aware of the behaviors of one's own gender. This provides one possible explanation for why respondents picked up more toxic subtle cues from leaders of the same gender. Further indirect support for intragender competition was apparent in the gender interaction effect found in *H4*, with comparatively more women, and less men, viewing Brad as an encouraging and motivating leader.

*Gender, collusion and conformity*

Men recorded higher overall scores for the collusion scale compared to women, suggesting men may have a greater propensity to be colluders under a toxic leader (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). One possible explanation is, once again, embedded within the anticipated differences in how each gender processes information. Reflecting their heuristic processing, males look for opportunities in communications (Dube and Morgan, 1996). Therefore a natural tendency to collude may be evident. A key characteristic of colluders is their ambition (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). Ambition in this sense resonates with the notion of self-focussed opportunities. Accordingly men may have viewed the toxic leader in the scenario more in relation to how they could best benefit from the situation, resulting in their greater propensity to collude.

Alternatively, this finding may simply reflect normative gender roles. The qualities typical of colluders also happen to be stereotypically more masculine (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) argued that leadership is concerned with agentic and communal attributes. Agentic attributes in the workplace have been associated with more traditionally masculine attributes, including, aggression, ambition, independence, self-confidence and competiveness (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). In contrast, communal characteristics have been suggested to center on qualities that are traditionally more feminine: affection, interpersonal sensitivity, kindness and empathy. Men and women have internalized these expected gender roles, which may lead to women being more predisposed toward conforming and men to collusion (Wood *et al.*, 1997).

*Limitations, managerial implications and future research*

*Limitations*. Although this study employed validated methods of recognition, the potential influence of acquiescence response set bias cannot be overlooked (Marder and David, 1961). Recognition tasks may cause participants to sway toward what they think are socially desirable responses due to an eagerness to please the researcher and give the "right" answer. However, the inclusion of bogus and foil items within the task reduced this negative potential (Singh and Churchill, 1986).

It also should be noted that the conducive environment of the Toxic Triangle was not assessed in this study. Research exploring the interactions between all three elements of the Toxic Triangle would facilitate further understanding of toxic leadership from a systems and practical perspective (Diamond, 2002).

*Managerial implications*. Understanding the different ways men and women process information is critical to assist in maximizing the effectiveness of intra-organizational communications. Employees may benefit from gender-specific communication strategies. For example, men appear to respond best to messages that are thematic, containing attribute-based features that emphasize the distinctive characteristics of a product. In contrast, women appear to prefer advertisements that are detailed,

descriptive and compare the product to similar products (Putrevu, 2001). Transferring this to the workplace women may benefit from communications from leaders that are highly detailed, containing all available information. Men may be best served with short communications that highlight the areas of importance and how the information concerns them. This tailored communication could potentially minimize misinterpretation of communication as toxic.

These implications are particularly applicable for industries that tend to be gender specific. Managers in heavily male-dominated professions such as the labor and trade industries (Reskin and Bielby, 2005) may more effectively communicate with their employees, particularly in relation change management, if they focus on overarching themes. Likewise, managers in heavily female-dominated professions, such as nursing, social work and early childhood education, could adjust their communications to accommodate women's detailed consideration of message particulars.

*Future research.* Further research is required to understand the range of influences that impact upon perception and interpretation of messages from a leader that may result in them being perceived as toxic. For example, how influences such as ethnicity, culture and the attractiveness of the leader may impact on toxic message perception and interpretation need exploration. In the current study, the hypothetical scenarios did not contain any physical description of the leader. Yet one's appearance has a strong influence on how they are perceived. People considered more physically attractive are assumed to be more likable, more social and more successful – the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon (Dion *et al.*, 1972). However, negative aspects of attractiveness have also been documented – the "beauty is beastly" effect (Braun *et al.*, 2012), with women displaying higher levels of anxiety toward more attractive women, resulting in reduced trust in the attractive individual (Massar *et al.*, 2009; Murray and Price, 2010). Accordingly, assessing leader attractiveness would help clarify how appearance may influence perceptions of leader toxicity.

Refinement of the conformity and collusion scales created for the current study would also be worthwhile. Replication of the study, and use of the scales in different contexts, will provide insight into their long term validity and reliability. Likewise, only overall measures of collusion and conformity were employed. Although both concepts emerged from the EFA as multi-dimensional, individual measures of these dimensions were not employed. A more detailed examination of these sub-dimensions and their proportional influence on perceptions of toxic leaders is required.

Additionally, future research would benefit from a more considered examination of whether an individual's age influences how they perceive a toxic leader. Previous research has suggested that demands on both our processing of information and our working memory increase with age (Phillips and Sternthal, 1977; Babcock and Salthouse, 1990). This results in changes in the way information is processed. Older adults have been proposed to employ more heuristic rather than systematic processing of information (Peters, 2010). Older employees may therefore be less likely to view leaders as toxic when compared to younger employees. Likewise, there is merit in investigating the possible existence of an interaction effect between age and gender and how toxic leaders are perceived. Older female employees may perhaps be most likely to view leaders as potentially toxic, while younger male employees may be the least likely to see a leader and their behaviors as toxic. Such investigations would add to our understanding of how leaders are perceived differently based on the characteristics of the follower or employee.

Finally, replication of the study with participants from varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds is warranted. The work of Hofstede (1983), particularly his concept of "power distances" (p. 81), provides a framework to investigate how culture may influence how toxic leaders are perceived. A cultural power distance is the extent to which the members of organizations accept how power is distributed (Hofstede, 1983). Cultures with larger power distances (e.g. India and The Philippines) should show a greater differential between employees and leaders (Hofstede, 1983). This may influence how the behaviors of leaders are perceived, with followers from high power distance cultures perhaps accepting a level of leader behavior that followers from low power distance cultures may view as toxic.

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**Further reading**

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