

Appendix

Constructs of Emotionally Toxic Workplaces.

Initial research by the current author and his research student Mr. Craig Pointon is reported here. It is included as an appendix only, as the project was of pilot study proportions.

The conceptual framework underlying our study was Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), which is well respected within the profession. In short, Personal Construct Psychology is based on the idea that everyone has a unique way of viewing or making sense of the world. When applied to emotionally toxic workplaces, everyone has a unique way of viewing or making sense of the phenomenon. For example, while one person may frame emotionally toxic workplaces as being an issue of management another person may frame it in terms of the nature of the work itself.

It is not appropriate to go into the details of PCP here. Instead the interested reader is directed to the writings of Hill (2012), Bannister & Fransella (1986), Stewart & Stewart (1981), Landfield & Epting (1987), Jankowitz, (2004) or Butt & Burr (2004).

Our study used a specialized PCP interviewing technique called “Repertory Grid” (or “Rep. Grid”). This involved taking participants through a moderately structured process to elicit the constructs or dimensions that they used to view or make sense of emotionally toxic workplaces. Construct elicitation involved creating bi-polar dimensions - giving labels to two contrasting poles which allowed for varying degrees in between (for example *black* versus *white* which allows for shades of grey in between or *warm* versus *cold* which allows for varying degrees of warmth in between.)

It should be noted that this research was conducted as a Summer Research Scholarship which required a supervised student to complete the project in just ten weeks. It should also be recognised that Repertory Grid is a labour intensive technique, which meant a relatively small sample size was used and hence our claim that this should be treated as preliminary exploratory or pilot-study research.

As evidenced by the literature reviewed in the body of this book, previous research on emotionally toxic work places tended to identify their characteristics and/or symptoms, sources and/or causes, outcomes and/or results, surviving and/or responding to toxic workplaces and also to describe emotionally toxic people. Our study contrasted with the previous research in that it sought to identify how people experienced toxic work places, perceived them and made sense of them. Specifically we sought to identify people's personal construction of these environments; their personal constructs.

Constructs were content analysed into theme categories. It was expected that many of the salient constructs would fall within the same themes reported above in the body of this book. Indeed one purpose of the research was to identify whether individuals who experienced toxic work environments construed them in the same ways as reported in the literature or whether they actually experienced them on other dimensions. This might have also revealed constructs associated with the contrast - civil work environments. By including one supplied construct – “*Not emotionally toxic at all* versus *extremely emotionally toxic*” - it was intended to identify those elicited constructs that were associated with emotionally toxic work environments.

Personal Construct Psychology suggests that everyone has a unique way of viewing or making sense of the world. Thus it was expected that no two participant's way of viewing or making sense of emotionally toxic workplaces would be exactly the same. However, it was expected that many of the participants would share some similarities in the way they viewed or made sense of the phenomenon. It was likely that many participants would share some constructs (though their wording may differ) and that themes of constructs, clusters and principal components would also emerge. From the literature reviewed we expected the emergence of constructs related to the toxicity created by the people in the organisation, particularly higher in an organisation hierarchy. We also expected constructs related to individual outcomes such as feelings of depression, stress, and so on.

To be eligible for participation as a respondent in this study an individual needed to have experienced at least four work environments with at least one of those being perceived by them as emotionally toxic. A mixture of sampling methods was used. The majority of participants came in response to an article about the research in a free local weekly

newspaper. The article briefly discussed the research and invited people who met the requirements to contact the researchers via email for further information, and in turn, so that an interview could be arranged. The rest of the participants were obtained through convenience and snowball sampling methods.

There were 15 participants in the sample. Of these, six were male and nine were female. There was a range of ages from “20 and under”, through ten year age brackets to “51 and over.” As each ten year step increased there was also one more participant such that the lowest age bracket had just one participant and culminating in five participants in the “51 and over” bracket. This was a chance occurrence; not planned. However, given that our respondents mainly volunteered to participate, this might indicate (tentatively) that older employees either have been subjected more often to emotionally toxic work phenomenon (perhaps by having been round long enough to experience at least one) or were more willing to speak up about it.

The highest level of education for twenty percent of participants (three) was secondary school. The remaining 80 percent of participants (12) had some form of tertiary qualification. Two participants (13.3 percent) had a Certificate or Diploma, seven (46.7 percent) had a completed or near complete Bachelors Degree, and three participants (20 percent) had a Post-Graduate qualification.

At the outset of this study the aim was to sample between 15 and 20 participants. This figure was chosen because of the labour intensive nature of the Rep. Grid method, and the short duration of the project. The data gathering phase spanned between four and five weeks.

Rep. Grid involved elicitation of a list of items to be thought about (known as “elements”). These were then used to elicit personal constructs. To elicit elements for the Repertory Grid participants were first asked to create a list of the work environments that they had experienced. Two environments were provided: their *current or most recent work environment* and their *conceptual ideal*. Participants were encouraged to try to produce eight more so that their list would total ten work environments. However, the minimum requirement was that they produced three additional elements so that their list would total a minimum of five work environments including *current* and *ideal*. At least one of those work environments had to be perceived by the participant as emotionally toxic. Each of the work

environments was listed on a separate card so that participants could move them around on the desk.

The work environments could include full-time, part-time or voluntary work arrangements. Furthermore, if for example a work environment started off as healthy but subsequently became toxic (perhaps due to a change in management), then it could count as two separate work environments.

The triad method for eliciting constructs was used and participants were instructed to produce a unique construct for each new triad that they were presented with. The triad method involved taking elements in groups of three and answering the question “In terms of what the work environments were (or are) like... In what way are two of the work environments similar, and yet, on the same dimension different from the third?” Participants were encouraged to vocalise their thought process, and when both parties agreed on the construct, it was written down to the side of a matrix (grid).

Once participants had produced as many constructs as they had work environments, they were then asked to transfer their work environments from the cards to the top of the grid to give it an X and Y axis. A seven-point rating scale was placed between the poles of each construct the participants had elicited to create self-produced semantic differential scales. They then rated each of their work environments on each of the constructs that they had created. They were also required to rate their work environments on a construct that had been provided for them - “*not emotionally toxic at all* versus *extremely emotionally toxic*”.

An additional step was also included to recognize that some people might have felt that important constructs had not emerged as a result of the Repertory Grid procedure. Participants who found that this was the case were given the opportunity to write down anything that they would like to add to their list of constructs before the interviews were concluded.

As each ‘interview’ was completed the data was processed using two different specialised computer software packages. The data was subjected to *Principal Components Analysis* using a package called *Idiogrid* (Grice, 2007) and *Cluster Analysis* using a package called *Enquire Within* (Mayes & Stewart, 1995-2004).

Principal Components Analysis produced an orthogonal “construct mind-map”. The outcomes from the analyses were used to write individual participant summaries. From these, attempts were made to label two principal components, and also to identify a label that described each cluster of (a) work environments and (b) constructs. In basic terms, principal components were the two main dimensions that each participant used to view or make sense of toxic work environments. Each individual summary was returned to the participant. It explained to them which work environments came close to, or distant from their toxic work environment(s) and ideal work environment; what the characteristics of toxic and ideal work environments were for them; which work environments clustered together as similar; which constructs of those environments clustered together as similar; and also commented on the gap between their actual and ideal work environments.

The combined participant data was analysed by conducting a frequency count and content analysis of: work environments stated as emotionally toxic; all constructs elicited; principal components; clusters of constructs; and clusters which included toxicity constructs.

Toxic work environments given by participants included government department, social work, counselling, postal service, trade industry, mechanical engineering (two), retail (two), sales, and credit management. However the most common was the education sector (four participants). Of those four participants, two were working as teachers, one a technical officer and one a personal assistant. Slightly over half of the toxic work environments given by participants were located in the Public Sector (eight). Industry and Sales both had three, and Financial Services (Credit Management) had one. As this was a study of pilot study proportions very little should be read into this distribution. However, in our home country of New Zealand, emotional toxicity does seem to be high in public sector bureaucracies, and in particular institutions involved in education and health.

From content analysis of constructs, we identified 13 emergent themes or categories. The most common categories were (1) *management's control of workers*, (2) *the nature or meaningfulness of work*, and (3) *the social nature of the work environment*. Others in rank order were: *Type of Work; Respect, Appreciation, Trust and Role of Workers; Demands on Workers; Management Competence and Relationship with Workers; Type of Employment;*

Structure of the Environment; Worker versus Management Values; Management Support of Workers; Achievement and Growth; Communication.

We configured the *Idiogrid* package to extract two principal components for each participant.. As there were 15 participants, there should have been a total of 30 principal components. However there was one individual for whom only one principal component could be identified. This occurred in an extremely cognitively simple construct system, where the individual had used nearly all the elicited constructs in an identical fashion. Therefore 29 principal components were identified and content analysed for emergent themes.

The most common group of principal components seemed to be concerned with *managements' relationship with staff* and the subsequent working environment - whether management was inclusive, had good communication, was supportive, or micromanaging and unpleasant. These principal components could possibly be broken down into a number of smaller groups. For example, *management's relationship with staff* could be broken down into *micromanagement vs. delegated or participative management, unrealistic expectations vs. realistic expectations*, and *poor communication vs. good communication*. The subsequent impact on working environment could be broken into *unsupportive vs. supportive* and *unfriendly vs. friendly*. There were 14 principal components in this *management relationship* group (48%).

A second group of principal components seemed to be concerned with the *meaningfulness of work* - whether the work was challenging, had variety, provided opportunities to grow and learn, and whether rewarding, or not. There were 5 principal components in this group (17%). A third group of principal components seemed to be concerned with *how individuals' were treated* – whether they were recognised, respected, valued, and empowered, or not. The remaining principal components did not seem to fit within any of the themes previously identified and hence seemed to stand alone.

Constructs were subject to cluster analysis. The majority of clusters of constructs could be loosely categorised into two themes. The first theme was related to *the workplace environment/culture and the relationship between management and employees*. The second theme concerned *the nature and meaningfulness of work*.

Ten different themes of constructs clustered with the provided *toxicity* construct. *Level of Control over Work (Micromanagement versus Autonomy)* was the most common theme clustered with toxicity, appearing 12 times or 28.5 percent. *Level of Sociability/Affability, Emotional Intelligence/Acceptance, Realism about Expectations/Pressure,* and *Morale/Encouragement to Achieve* all appeared five times or 11.9 percent.

The education sector was the industry or place of work most commonly given by participants as an emotionally toxic work environment. This is in part in line with the existing literature that highlighted schools as common sites of toxicity (Vickers, 2006; İrfaner & Eçretin, 2008) and this matches our own home city where secondary schools have featured highly in media reports of toxic environments. This finding was also supported anecdotally by personal experience of the researchers who themselves have had contact with people who have encountered toxicity while working in local schools or higher learning institutions. Over half of the industries or places of work given by participants as their emotionally toxic work environment were located in the Public Sector. This again aligns with the literature such as Vickers (2006) discussions of uncivil workplaces in public administration organisations such as schools and hospitals.

Of those participants whose emotionally toxic industry was the Education Sector almost all of their principal components reflected their perception of management. This included micro-managing, untrusting, unrealistic, unsupportive, not encouraging, non-affable, incompetent, and having poor or incompatible values. This is consistent with existing literature which identified those higher up in the organisational hierarchy (bosses and managers) as being the most common source of toxicity in the workplace (Bacal, 2000; Goldman, 2008). According to Vickers (2006), people who initiate incivility in the workplace were three times more likely to be of higher status than the target. In fact, Bacal (2000) and Appelbaum & Roy-Girard (2007) suggested that the manager or director was the most important influence in the emergence of a toxic workplace. It is interesting to note that the participants from the education sector did not mention their relationships with students as part of the toxicity.

As expected, no two participants' ways of construing emotionally toxic workplaces were exactly the same but many of them shared similarities. Three themes appear to have emerged from this study with respect to the way in which participants viewed or made sense of emotionally toxic workplaces. As stated earlier, these themes were: (1) *management's*

control of work; (2) *the nature or meaningfulness of work*; and (3) *the social nature of the work environment*. These three factors could be considered as falling under the *umbrella* of how individuals' were treated - namely, as "cogs" in the "corporate machine". While this label was specifically given to the third to most common principal component theme, it was also inherent in the way all participants viewed or made sense of emotionally toxic workplaces.

Management's control of work (for example, micro-managing) was: (a) the most common construct category; (b) the most common construct theme clustered with toxicity; and (c) the second to most common principal component group aligned with toxicity. This dominant theme is consistent with the existing literature which, as previously mentioned, identified management as the most common source of toxicity in the workplace. For instance Coccia (1998) stated that toxic organisations were based on control and suggested that controlling leaders were toxic because of the *rules* that they followed.

Frost (2004), in what he referred to as "Incompetence" – one of the seven deadly "Ins" - discussed the type of manager who was a source of toxicity through misunderstanding the boundaries between their own role and those of staff members. According to Frost, these types of managers became control freaks who micro-managed their staff and subsequently stifled their staff members' feelings of autonomy. Interestingly, the exact words "micro-managed" and "autonomy" were elicited as poles of a construct seven and four times, respectively, and seemed to be related to incompetence.

Di Genio (2002) also identified micro-management as a characteristic of toxic managers. As with Frost (2004), Di Genio (2002) also attributed this to incompetence. He suggested that because managers lacked competence, they also lacked confidence and therefore the ability to lead and manage staff members effectively. Toxic managers were deficient in their ability to plan strategically and delegate appropriately (Kimura, 2003). While only being the sixth-equal to most commonly elicited construct category, our participants did nevertheless view or make sense of emotionally toxic workplaces in terms of management incompetence. However, it seemed that participants viewed or made sense of emotionally toxic workplaces more in the way management treated them (for example, controlled) than the characteristics of management or the reasons why management acted as it did (for example, incompetence).

Lubit (2004) identified four types of toxic manager with one of those types being “rigid” (Kimura, 2003). Hay (2004) gave thirteen commonly agreed upon characteristics of the toxic workplace. Two of them related to this theme of control; *Lack of good leadership and management* and particularly *authoritarianism, legalism, rigidity, control*. Most of this different terminology was used by participants in the current study, but what is clear is that management’s control over their work, or inversely, participants’ lack of control over their own work, stood out to participants as a key characteristic of their experience of emotionally toxic workplaces.

It is worth noting that while providing an alternative explanation to toxic management as the source for the emergence of toxic workplaces, Tunajek (2007) suggested that “the problem exists in any environment where one group is subjected to control (real or perceived) by another group.” (p. 30). This highlighted that it was about those with authority that enabled control - it just so happened that in the workplace that was management.

The nature or meaningfulness of work was: (a) the second to most common construct category, (b) the second to most common principal component theme and (c) the second to most recurrent theme of clusters. *The social nature of the work environment* was: (a) the third to most common construct category and (b) second to most common construct theme clustered with toxicity. These two themes were not identified in the existing literature. These two results perhaps represent a departure of our study from others in that we sought to determine how people made sense of these environments, as opposed to describing them or identifying the sources of toxicity within them.

How individuals were treated as “cogs” in the “corporate machine” was: (a) the third to most common principal component theme and (b) might be considered as an “umbrella” encompassing the three aforementioned themes. While many of the elicited constructs which formed this theme were not explicitly discussed by the existing literature (whether participants were valued, trusted, respected, had responsibility, autonomy, were recognised, and appreciated), they could be deemed to be implicit in the discussion on toxic management. The “umbrella” how individuals’ are treated as “cogs” in the “corporate machine” was, however, explicitly discussed in the existing literature. For example Hay (2004) used the term “cog” when suggesting that organisations treated their people as if they were replaceable or interchangeable.

Pfeffer (reported in Webber, 1998), Hay (2004) and Macklem (2005) all identified organisation's failure to value their employees as being sources of toxicity. According to the existing literature, mistreatment of employees was the reason for high levels of turnover, absenteeism, withholding effort, and deviant behaviour (for example theft) that plagued these organisations. According to Kimura (2003) people in toxic workplaces felt more managed and less autonomous. When they felt their boss was "stifling their progress or undervaluing their contributions, they feel justified in seeking employment elsewhere" (pg. 28)

In conclusion, elicited constructs in this study were in line with the existing literature concerning emotionally toxic workplaces. In fact, most of the concepts that emerged from the literature also appeared in the constructs of our participants. For example, four out of the five most common recurrent themes of construct clusters, were mentioned in the existing literature. The fifth was mentioned in part (affability, but not sociability). These included: level of control over work (as already mentioned in detail), level of emotional intelligence/acceptance, realism about expectations/pressure, and morale/encouragement to achieve. It should also be mentioned that poor communication or lack thereof, came up as part of the most common group of principal components. Where the existing literature and this study differed was in the second and third most common ways that participants viewed or made sense of emotionally toxic workplaces - namely, *the meaningfulness of work* and the *social nature of the work environment*. Hence, this study tentatively suggests the presence of new information which may be added to the existing body of knowledge on emotionally toxic workplaces and which therefore merits further investigation.

Our study and the literature revealed that there seems to be a lot of toxicity in workplaces. It cannot simply be refuted and dismissed as non-existent. People do experience emotional toxicity and the damage that goes with it.

In terms of management education, the results of this study give support to some postmodern management literature which advocates more recognition of the human element in organisations as opposed to orthodox management thinking that treats the organisation as emotionless (leave your emotions at the door), asocial and amoral (see for instance, Barry, Chandler, Clark, Johnson, and Needle, 2000; Morgan 2006). The literature indicated that emotionally toxic work places were damaging to both the organisation and the people who

worked in them. Hence management and leadership education (whether tertiary education or executive education) would do well to make learners aware of the conditions that surround emotionally toxic work places with a view to making them less pervasive and less damaging. In particular our results would suggest exposing learners to the fallacies of micro-management, absolute control, *cogs in the machine* mentality that leads to meaningless drudge and treating the organisation as asocial.

It occurred to the current author that our findings came close to Hackman & Oldham's (1976) job characteristics that they postulated led to higher satisfaction. Hence in summary form it appeared that our participants experienced emotional toxicity when one or more of the Hackman & Oldham dimensions were also negatively experienced. These are: (1) *Skill variety* - worker's opportunity to use a number of skills; (2) *Task identity* - extent that the job requires completion of an entire identifiable piece of work, versus, just part of some bigger piece of work; (3) *Task significance* - the effect the job has on the lives of other people and its meaningfulness; (4) *Autonomy* - the workers freedom to act; and (5) *Feedback* - the amount of feedback the job provides workers about effectiveness of their performance or quality of their product or service. Hence management education or advocacy processes might encourage management to at least consider these five characteristics of work as well as understanding the limitations of absolute control and the role of social influences in the work place.

About the Author

Dr. Robin Hill has most recently contributed teaching to Business Research Methods, Organisational Behaviour, Human Resource Management, Adult Education and entry level Psychology at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. The emotionally toxic workplace is currently Robin's main research interest and falls within a larger portfolio he calls "The rehumanisation of work, business and organisation." Robin's other area of research interest is the application of Personal Construct Psychology to issues in organisational behaviour. The appendix of this book represents an attempt to reconcile these two separate research interests.

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