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## **UNDERSTANDING THE FOLLOWERS OF TOXIC LEADERS:**

### **TOXIC ILLUSIO AND PERSONAL UNCERTAINTY**

#### **Abstract**

Toxic leaders are one of the main threats to the wellbeing of people in the workplace and in society in general, and followers play a critical role in constructing and maintaining toxic leaders. In this narrative review, we draw on Bourdieu's concept of illusio and incorporate it with the social and cognitive psychology approaches in an attempt to frame the dynamic system that sustains toxic leadership through continued support of the followers. More specifically, as we introduce the illusio perspective in a process-relational context to the toxic leadership discussion, we (i) address the allure of toxic leaders as an incentive for followers to join the toxic illusio as a way to cope with their high personal uncertainty, (ii) illustrate the mechanisms and processes that motivate followers of toxic leaders to remain in the toxic illusio once they join. In this context, we also briefly discuss and differentiate between the ethical and moral dimensions of toxic leadership.

**Keywords:** Toxic leader, follower, personal uncertainty, social-identity, agency, ethical decision making, morality

Toxic leaders are fundamentally detrimental to the welfare of humanity (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013). In almost every aspect of our lives, toxic leaders ‘by dint of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal qualities generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead’ (Lipman-Blumen, 2005c: 29). Moreover, this pernicious impact of toxic leaders remains high in both work and social environments thanks to the ardent support of their followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). As there could be no leaders nor any leadership phenomena without followers (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2018), we need to better understand the followers of toxic leaders in order to combat the negative consequences of toxic leadership (Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, & Lunsford, 2016).

As there is no universally accepted definition of toxic leadership in the literature, we draw from the approach by Lipman-Blumen (e.g., 2005b) and accept the axiom that violating the fundamental human rights of anyone, eroding the rule of law, corruption, discrimination, and destroying the environment are all toxic behaviors that create lasting damage in the societies in which they occur. Consequently, we suggest that a leadership phenomenon is toxic to the degree that it normalizes and sustains such toxic behavior. Unfortunately, there are a great number of examples of crises, in part due to toxic leadership, such as the recent crisis of moral entrepreneurship at the Cochrane foundation (Greenhalgh et al., 2019), major fraud and toxic envy at Theranos (Hartmans & Leskin, 2020), abuse of employees at Amazon (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015), mishandling and monetization of private user data by Facebook (Graham-Harrison & Cadwalladr, 2018), and the unapologetic discrimination at Uber (Mancini, 2017). Examples of toxic leadership are ample in the political domain as well, such as in the Lava Jato (Car Wash) corruption scandal of Rouseff (Watts, 2016), the often-stated electoral

authoritarianism of Putin (Snyder, 2018) and Viktor Orbán (Lendvai, 2018), and the outright dictatorships of Kim Jong-Un (Frank, 2012). There is also an unfortunate number of toxic leadership phenomena at the societal level, ranging from the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League movement (Bush, 2007) to more marginal and tragic incidents such as mass suicides of Jonestown Massacre (Barker, 1986) and the Heaven's Gate suicides (Balch & Taylor, 2002). Nevertheless, the toxic leadership phenomenon is not limited to extreme and infamous cases, and most people experience consequences of varying degrees of toxic leadership in their work, family, and society on a daily basis.

There is scant but increasing attention regarding why and how individuals become followers of toxic leaders (e.g., Pelletier, Kottke, & Sirotnik, 2018). The literature has yet to fully uncover the dynamics of the relationship between toxic leaders and their followers. Furthermore, the literature treats followers mostly as mirrors that reflect the leader on outcomes (May, Wesche, Heinitz, & Kerschreiter, 2014; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). As such, there is a risk of framing followers of toxic leaders as innocent victims or ignorant bystanders who drift with the allure of these leaders. In this narrative review, we maintain that being a follower is volitional and that followers are the individuals who identify themselves as followers of a specific leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). We draw on the Bourdieusian construct of *illusio* together with a narrative review of the social and cognitive psychological approaches. As such, we illustrate the utility of treating followers as agents and co-creators of the toxic phenomenon in terms of understanding why individuals become and remain followers of toxic leaders.

*Illusio* is 'the tendency of participants to engage in the game and to believe in its significance, that is, believe that the benefits promised by the field are desirable' (Heidegren & Lundberg, 2010: 12). Therefore, conceptualizing toxic leadership as an *illusio* explains not only

why individuals are allured by toxic leaders, but also why they do not seek a way out of the toxic game, even when there are alternative games with better yield. We argue that the toxic illusio draws individuals into the game and entices them to stay, because the toxic illusio itself performs a critical function and fulfills a strong need for the individual to have certainty in their life.

The literature on the habits and practices of toxic leaders suggest that one of the most common and effective offerings of toxic leaders is the worldview (i.e., the conception of the world) and the self-concept (i.e., ‘an extensive knowledge structure containing many pieces of information relevant to the self’, Lord & Brown, 2004: 33) attached to their followership (e.g., Arendt, 1951; Snyder, 2017). We argue that toxic leaders’ proposed worldview and self-concept appeal to individuals with high levels of personal uncertainty. Personal uncertainty (or self-uncertainty) is the uncertainty about the individual’s own self-concept, values, identity, and overall concept of ‘who one is and how one should behave’ (Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013: 637). Such an aversive state might be induced by both unstable external contexts and a lack of resources and capitals to overcome uncertainties, and adopting a strong worldview and self-concept is an effective way to curb personal uncertainty (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; van den Bos, 2009).

Toxic illusio’s pull and promise of a stable self-concept is especially strong, since individuals are particularly motivated to reduce their uncertainty about their selves. Moreover, while individuals join and remain in the toxic illusio for their personal benefit (i.e., for instance accruing different forms of capitals and power in their specific field of relations), their participation collectively shapes and sustains the toxic illusio. The illusio, in return, colors the perceptions, expectations, and future choices of its players and shapes the logic of their field of

relations due to the vested interests and illusory promises involved in the vision set forth by a toxic leader.

Drawing on the conceptual universe of Bourdieu, we construe toxic leadership as an *illusio* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and followers as players who join the habitus of the toxic game in order to reduce their personal uncertainty induced by their low endowment of varied forms of capital in their specific field of relations (Bourdieu, 1986). Accordingly, the present paper contributes to the scholarly discussions on two points. First, the conceptualization of toxic leadership phenomenon as an *illusio* allows us to formalize the followers as self-interested players of a toxic game with its own habitus, i.e. intersubjective rules and dynamics. In other words, the construct of *illusio* (i) emphasizes the agency of its players, as they have varied forms of capital. Such agency is ‘the capacity and intention to control their own behavior and outcomes by assessing the situation and determining how best to reach their goals while remaining faithful to their beliefs and dispositions’ (Swann & Jetten, 2017: 382) and (ii) facilitates further investigation of the internal dynamics of the toxic leadership as a Bourdieusian field by organizing the literature from diverse fields. Second, following the call of van Knippenberg and colleagues (2004), we explore personal uncertainty, induced by followers’ lack of various forms of capital endowments, as a motivation to join the toxic *illusio*, and we discuss the relevant mechanisms that entice and engage individuals.

Although we provide a conceptual model, our manuscript is predominantly a narrative review that explicates the significance of the decision making and cognitive processes of the followers of toxic leaders. Notably, our review focuses on the decision making and cognitive processes of the followers of toxic leaders while excluding the discussions of leader-centric models of toxic leadership.

In this narrative review, we bring together diverse literatures that have not been considered together before, including literature on toxic leaders, Bourdieusian *illusio*, followership, personal uncertainty, and ethical and moral decision making from disciplines of management, organisational and cognitive psychology, and organisational sociology with a view to present an original contribution. We acknowledge that the boundaries of the narrative review are set within our systematic reading of these disparate literatures together in order to address our focal problematic of why people follow toxic leaders. In particular, our paper delves into the dark side of leadership, adding another dimension to the debates in the journal on shared leadership (Sweeney, Clarke, Higgs 2019) and authentic leadership (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019), both of which engage with the high road to leadership. In terms of ontology, the process-relational approach that we take is in line with the framing of relational social constructionist approach to leadership by Endres and Weibler (2017).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly describe our narrative review methodology and process. Second, we discuss the concepts of ethics, morality, and toxicity in the context of leadership and specifically followers. Third, we review the conceptual universe of Bourdieu and introduce toxic *illusio* as its application in a toxic leadership context. Fourth, building on the toxic *illusio* and personal uncertainty constructs and the synthesis of a diverse range of extant theories, we describe why some individuals join the toxic *illusio*, why they remain in the game, and what it takes for them to leave. Finally, we conclude with our suggestions for future research areas in light of the framework we introduced as well as possible limitations for such research.

## Method

The starting point for our review was our desire to present a follower-centric approach to Lipman-Blumen's toxic leadership construct. In order to explain why individuals may become and remain followers of toxic leaders, we used Bourdieu's notion of *illusio*, which accounts for the individuals' inability to develop healthy distance to the social games which they join.

Adopting a process-relational perspective, we turned to the literature on cognitive and social psychology and ethical decision making in order to explain the behaviors of followers of toxic leaders.

As such, we started this project with the awareness of a knowledge gap in the toxic leadership literature and a well-defined research question. We had prior information about the key texts and theories of toxic leadership, Bourdieusian *illusio*, cognitive and social psychology, and ethics that may be applicable to our research question. Consequently, we adopted a narrative review approach to organize and synthesize the previous literature (Hammersley, 2001; Hodgkinson & Ford, 2014).

Narrative review is described as a process that "begins with a small number of articles and books, which are then used to identify key authors and other articles that are related to the particular topic" (Jones & Gatrell, 2014: 257). As our conceptual model draws from a number of different literatures (i.e., toxic leadership, followership, Bourdieusian *illusio*, social identity and personal uncertainty, moral decision making, individual decision making and biases), we have identified starting points in each of those lines of research. We also combed through classical texts and books as well as recent journal articles in leading journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Review*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Management*, and *Leadership Quarterly*), and we have expanded our review through

the frequently cited texts found therein. Furthermore, we ran searches in the Web of Science and Google Scholar for the combinations of relevant terms such as toxic, destructive and pseudo-transformational leaders and leadership, followers, *illusio*, personal uncertainty, and ethical decision making. For each search, we read the abstracts and reviewed the relevant papers in detail. Notably, the narrative review process is a ‘hermeneutic circle’ (c.f., Alvesson, 2010: 196), and it implicates iterative phases of ‘review and (re)constitution’ (c.f., Rhodes & Pullen, 2018: 485). In that sense, in addition to searching for additional literature, our narrative review implies re-readings of important texts as we build our conceptual model.

As discussed in greater detail in the next section, there are a number of different definitions of toxic/destructive leadership. Our understanding of toxic leadership predominantly overlaps with Lipman-Blumen’s conceptualization, and therefore, we started our review based on her works. We also reviewed every article we could find on toxic leadership (e.g., Heppel, 2011; Pelletier, 2010, 2012) as well as similar constructs such as destructive leadership (e.g., Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2016) and pseudo-transformational leadership (e.g., Tourish, 2013). We have also extended our review to the seminal as well as most recent relevant books and articles from other disciplines such as political science (e.g., Arendt, 1951; Snyder, 2017).

Although the literature on followership is now a mature field, with more than 25,000 manuscripts with the word ‘followership’ in the abstract, there are much fewer papers on toxic followers (e.g., “toxic follower” found in 15 manuscripts and “destructive leader follower” in 72). In line with our conceptualization of toxic leadership as an *illusio* and its players as its co-creators, we adopted the constructivist approach to followership and chose the review by Uhl-Bien and colleagues (2014) of the field as our key text. Given the lack of explicit focus on the



followers of toxic leaders, hence the gap in the literature, we mostly used the toxic leadership manuscripts to grasp how previous literature frame followers, specifically in toxic contexts.

Furthermore, since we consider followers of toxic leaders to be agents with social cognitive processes, we turned to the related literature to identify the mechanisms that constitute the allure and sustainability of toxic leadership phenomena. As expected, there were a limited number of papers on follower cognition and decision-making (e.g., “follower cognition” in 85 articles and “follower decision making” in 330). Based on the toolset that toxic leaders use to attract and keep followers and the discussion on material, social, cultural, and symbolic resources (and their deficit) within the Bourdieusian conceptual universe, we focused on personal uncertainty as the main motivator for individuals to join a toxic game. There is strong research on personal uncertainty, with more than 4,000 scholarly texts on the subject (e.g., van den Bos, 2009), and the relationship between personal uncertainty and toxic leadership phenomena is already well-established (e.g., Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013).

Thanks to its close ties with individuals’ self-image and social identity, personal uncertainty is not only a coherent mechanism to explain why individuals join the toxic illusion, but it also provides an effective foundation for synthesizing other cognitive and social psychological mechanisms that keep individuals in the game. In that regard, we started our review on ethical decision-making literature with the excellent annual review by Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart (2014) as well as periodic reviews by O’Fallon and Butterfield (between 1996-2003; 2005) and Craft (between 2004-2011; 2013). We also extended our review to sub-fields of ethical decision making and its nomological network, such as moral disengagement (e.g., Bandura, 1999), moral decoupling (e.g., Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013), moral identity (e.g., Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008), moral rationalization (e.g., Tsang,

2002), cognitive dissonance (e.g., Festinger, 1957), biases and heuristics (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and normalization of corruption (e.g., Ashforth & Anand, 2003) in general.

Finally, Bourdieusian *illusio* is the main umbrella construct in our understanding of the processes and mechanisms that allure and retain followers in toxic leadership phenomena. Our review revealed limited use of the construct in leadership contexts and no prior framing in terms of toxic followers. We resorted to the primary texts of Bourdieu and his colleagues (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) as well as applications of *illusio* in other contexts (e.g., Lupu, & Empson, 2015; Tatli, Ozbilgin, & Karatas-Ozkan, 2018) for our conceptualization process.

To summarize, our narrative review confirmed that the literature on toxic leadership is often studied from leader-centric approaches, with a few exceptions by authors such as Padilla and colleagues (2007). We develop this literature further by explicating the decision making and cognitive processes behind the how and why individuals become and remain followers of a toxic leader.

### **Ethics, morality, and toxicity**

The existence and nature of a universal code of ethics has been debated by a number of great thinkers. Marx (1843), for example, argued against the existence of a universal ethics code because he believed that ethics is *dialectical*, and therefore historically and economically conditioned. In his view, ethics was shaped and reshaped by a world that is constantly changing and was dependent on who you are in the society. Nietzsche also argued against the existence of a universal ethics code, but for reasons that are very different from Marx. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche (1883-1891) argued that the ideal of a universal ethics is the very burden that individuals need to confront before they can achieve self-realization, or in other words,

transform into an *ubermensch*. Indeed, as Nietzsche explains through allegories, an individual can become an *ubermensch* if and only if they can slay the dragon of the existing moral values and create their own ethics from scratch with the unbiasedness of a small child. Kant (1785), on the other hand, not only defended the existence of a universal rule of ethic, but also proposed the *categorical imperative* as a candidate: ‘Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law’ (p. 30). In other words, according to Kant, an act is ethical if the individual would prefer a world in which the act is the norm.

Alternatively, Rawls (1971) suggested a *veil of ignorance* approach to attain the universal ethic. According to Rawls, an act is ethical if and only if the individual would have approved that action from behind the veil of ignorance, or from the *original position*, at which ‘no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like’ (p. 117). In that sense, Rawls’ argument suggests that an act is ethical to the extent that the individual would agree to it without knowing whether they will be the subject or the perpetrator of the act.

Considering that the greatest minds of human species are yet to agree upon the existence of and/or what constitutes the universal code of ethics, it is a formidable task to define what toxicity means in a way that would satisfy every reader (Petocz & Miner, 2003) within the scope of the present paper. Indeed, despite its growing popularity among scholars, media, and the general public, what toxic leadership means remains largely contested. In addition to several other conceptualizations of the ‘dark side of leadership’ such as destructive leadership, tyrannical leadership, and pseudo- transformational leadership (Thoroughgood et al., 2016), there are a number of definitions for toxic leadership with different disciplinary backgrounds. For instance, derived from a management perspective, Whicker (1996) and Kellerman (2004) defined toxic

leaders through their common traits and behaviors, whereas Goldman (2006) used clinically diagnosable mental health disorders to describe toxic leaders.

In line with Lipman-Blumen's toxic leadership framework (2005a, 2005b, 2005c), we define toxic leaders as leaders who create serious and enduring harm by engaging in 'destructive behaviors' and exhibiting 'dysfunctional characteristics'. In that sense, toxic leaders mislead their followers through lies and illusions, play to their 'basest fears and needs'; promote 'incompetence, cronyism, corruption' (Heppell, 2011: 244); and 'undermine, demean, marginalize, intimidate, demoralize, and disenfranchise' non-followers, and in extreme cases 'incapacitate, imprison, terrorize, torture, or kill' them (Pelletier, 2010: 376). Accordingly, we take the view that a leadership is toxic even if it provides partial benefit to some (especially followers), and yet cause more harm on balance through normalization of toxic behaviors such as deinstitutionalization, decreased transparency and responsibility, lack of accountability, corruption and self-interested allocation of resources, as well as violation of fundamental human and animal rights and environmental harm. We acknowledge that there are degrees within the toxicity of a leadership phenomenon, as minor corruption cannot be equated with torture or murder, but within the scope of this paper, we focus our attention on the generalizable mechanisms and processes regardless of the degree of toxicity.

Notably, the fact that we as non-players consider a particular leadership phenomenon as unethical does not mean that followers of toxic leaders have a negative perception of their own morality. Indeed, although it is common practice to use ethics and morality interchangeably in the social sciences literature (Treviño & Nelson, 2013), the philosophy literature makes a distinction between the two. Particularly, in his *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel argues that, whereas morality is subjective for each particular person, ethics comes from 'values, institutions,

and norms' that are 'universally or objectively good' (Abramson, 2009: 306). Therefore, as long as individuals take their conscience as the measure of right conduct, they can have a moral life but not necessarily an ethical one. Similarly, players of toxic illuſio may believe that their actions are moral as long as they derive their self-concept and worldview from the game. As their personal ethical standards are strongly aligned with the toxic illuſio, complying with the toxic game is moral by definition. Consequently, not only might the players not experience any moral dissonance themselves, but they might also perceive the toxic leader – the prototype of the illuſio's social identity – as the pivot of morality. Indeed, the previous literature suggests that an individual's attitude towards the leader significantly affects that person's evaluations of the leader (Hansbrough, Lord, & Schyns, 2015) and that the subjective evaluations of a particular leader's toxicity are inherently shaped by whether the individual identifies as a follower or not (Pelletier, 2012). That is why, as Lipman-Blumen (2005a, 2005b, 2005c) so accurately identified, even the toxic leaders that have been condemned globally as evil are rallied and cherished as righteous heroes by their followers. In that sense, it is important to emphasize that, even if the rest of the world (along with the scientific community) has reached a consensus on the toxicity of a leader, the toxic illuſio may still shield the leader from his/her followers' scrutiny.

Furthermore, followers of toxic leaders decide to join and remain in such toxic illuſio with agency. Because these players are agents, they are also responsible for the outcomes of the social phenomenon they co-create. In that regard, we strongly believe that this responsibility of members of the toxic illuſio demands further investigation into their roles in co-creating and perpetuating the phenomenon, and the reasons why they join and remain in these toxic games. Consequently, the present paper's aim is to take a first step in organizing the previous knowledge

about toxic leaders' and their followers' motivations and behaviors and to present it in a framework that might enable future research to a better understanding of the toxic leadership phenomenon.

### **Bourdieu's Conceptual Universe and the Allure of Toxic Leaders**

Bourdieu's conceptual universe has been increasingly employed in order to explore leadership phenomena (Thomson, 2016; Eacott, 2016). The concept of the field refers to the dynamic web of relations of power in a particular context (Bourdieu, 1986). Leadership is such a field in which the leader and the followers have a web of relations in which they deploy varied forms of capitals and power in order to secure and advance their interests. Habitus is the taken-for-granted meanings which have become customary to an individual or a collective as a result of being repeated and legitimated in a given field of relations (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2011). Individuals within the same field and who share a collective habitus may still display variations in terms of their behavioral choices. Bourdieu accounts for this diversity with variety in the capital endowments, dispositions, and strategies of individuals. Bourdieu defines four types of capital (Tatli, Ozbilgin, & Karatas-Ozkan, 2018). Economic capital refers to the financial and nonfinancial assets that have economic value. Social capital is the endowment of social connections that an individual has. Cultural capital refers to capacity acquired through education and experience in life. Finally, symbolic capital refers to the status, recognition, and respect one acquires in a given context. Individuals strive to accumulate different forms of capital, and they convert different capitals to one another in their pursuit of their life goals. For example, they may use their social capital in order to enhance economic prospects and acquire educational qualifications to improve their symbolic capital.

Lack of one or more forms of capital may induce in individuals some level of personal uncertainty. Individuals may try to address their personal uncertainty by acquiring and strategically deploying varied forms of capitals to enhance their positionality in the field through their life course. Through the concepts of the field, the habitus and capitals, it is possible to understand why individuals follow leaders whose visions help them enhance their stakes in life. However, in this paper, we turn to one of the least-used concepts of Bourdieu, the *illusio*, to explore why individuals join and remain followers of toxic leaders. *Illusio* helps us understand why people join social, economic, and cultural games, and by doing so, how they are absorbed by the game. Bourdieu defines *illusio* as the belief that the game that an individual play is worth playing (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Once taken in by the *illusio*, players of the game do not search for a way out of the game, even when there are alternative games with better yield that they could play. An example of an *illusio* can be the belief in the significance of overtime work for high performance in a workplace, in which the rules of the game require overtime work when there is no causal relationship between overtime work and high performance (Lupu & Empson, 2015). Overtime work remains an *illusio* norm that people do not challenge, even when it no longer leads to productivity or effectiveness at work, and on the contrary, could prove detrimental for some individuals.

For Bourdieu, the *illusio* evades criticism by the players who are absorbed in the game and its peculiar rules in a given field of relations. In that regard, what Lipman-Blumen calls the allure of toxic leadership is akin to the appeal of *illusio* for the players of any particular game. Followers are drawn to toxic leadership, which provides them with an alluring and strong alternative worldview and a stable self-concept that incites them to play. Moreover, as players of the toxic game, followers expect to receive the benefits associated with the game as long as they

remain as one. Additionally, the benefits of the game do not have to be limited to psychological domain. Individuals may reduce their personal uncertainty by acquiring both a worldview and access to social, cultural, economic, and symbolic resources afforded by the field of relations in the toxic *illuio*, which may serve them well. Even if an individual is drawn into the toxic *illuio* solely to avoid the aversive feelings related to the personal uncertainty, they can still become constrained by the social and material ties they form as the game goes on. In fact, as we discuss later in greater detail, these ties, threats, and promises may both serve the interests of and restrain an individual from quitting the game, even when they become disillusioned about the worldview and the self-concept that were offered by the toxic leader.

As the *illuio* is co-constructed by all parties that join the game and the context in which the game takes place, the leader and the followers mutually sustain the toxic *illuio* and give it internal legitimacy. Consequently, our approach emphasizes how followers are not passive, innocent bystanders but willful, self-interested agents who sustain and support the toxic *illuio* together with the leader and other followers. Indeed, we support the approach that followers are responsible for the consequences of the toxic *illuio*. Nevertheless, there is the threat of neglecting the agency of the individual follower through narratives that corrode the will and the responsibility of the followers of toxic leaders. In a vicious cycle, the denudation of the followers' agency under toxic leaders in theory provides more legitimization for leaders to erode followers' agency and individualism in practice (Tourish, 2013). That's why we believe that it is crucial to understand the choices, chances, motives, and reasoning of the followers of toxic leaders in order to avoid future reproductions of the toxic *illuio*.



## Joining the Toxic Game

Each illuso has its own unique allure that attracts prospective players and keeps the current players in. The composition of this unique allure may vary from mostly psychological benefits to more material gains, i.e., different forms of capitals, depending on the field, the leader, and their followers. In fact, previous literature suggested a variety of categorizations based on followers' motivations, such as colluders and conformers of the toxic triangle (Padilla et al., 2007), lost souls, bystanders, opportunists, acolytes, and authoritarians of the susceptible circle (Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012), Lipman-Blumen's anxious benign followers, pragmatic benign followers, the leader's entourage, and malevolent followers (2005b). Nevertheless, as Lipman-Blumen herself discusses in her book, 'The Allure of Toxic Leaders' (2005b), the primary allure of the toxic illuso is 'the meaning of life' (p. 52) as well as the feelings of 'belonging, safety, and direction' (p.35) associated with it. In that regard, the present paper focuses on personal uncertainty as the motivating factor behind an individual's decision to join the toxic game by increasing their need for these offerings of the toxic illuso.

Previous studies demonstrate higher support for autocratic and populist leaders who provide a strong identity among individuals who experience high levels of personal uncertainty (Schoel, Bluemke, Mueller, & Stahlberg, 2011). We argue that individuals with high levels of personal uncertainty are pulled in by the promise of avoiding this aversive state through internalizing the strong worldview and self-concept, which are presented by the toxic illuso (Figure 1). Admittedly, providing a worldview and self-concept to their followers is not exclusive to toxic leaders. Transformational leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1994), for example, are distinguished by their idealized influence and inspirational motivation. In that sense, it is important to note that the present paper constrains its focus to toxic leadership phenomena.

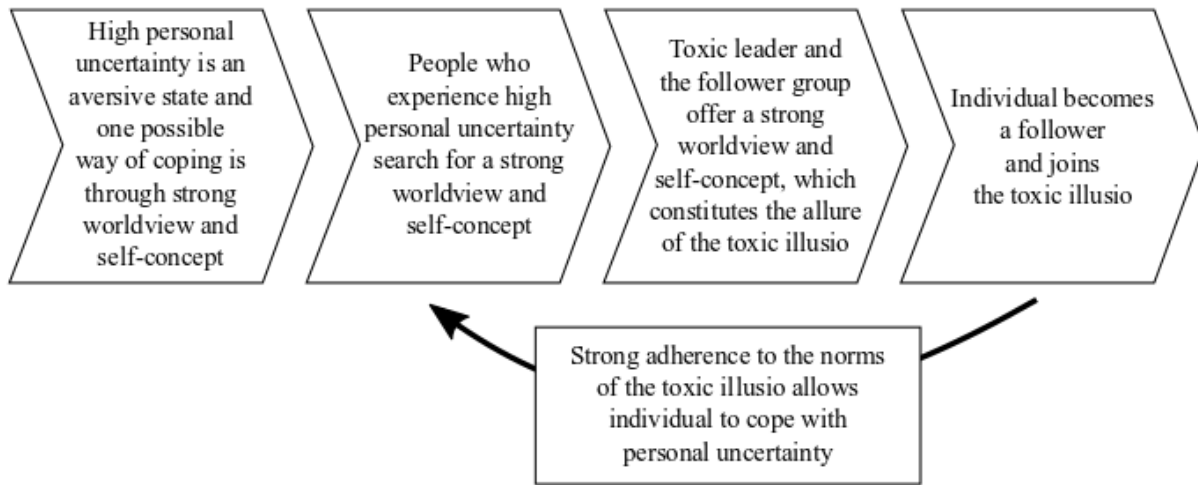


Figure 1: Interplay between the toxic illusio and personal uncertainty

Source: Adapted from van den Bos, 2009: 23

Personal uncertainty is defined as a ‘subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views, worldviews, or the interrelation between the two’ (van den Bos, 2009: 198). A similar construct, self-uncertainty, is defined as ‘feelings of uncertainty, particularly about or relating to who one is and how one should behave’ (Hogg, 2015: 308). Concordantly, self-uncertainty is an aversive temporal state, and individuals are motivated to reduce it (Guillén Ramo, Jacquart, & Hogg, 2018). Causes of personal uncertainty can be framed by using Bourdieu’s notions of capitals and identify this lack of social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). As such, a lack of resources renders individuals susceptible to experience higher levels of personal uncertainty that exists in their unique field of relations. In that sense, personal uncertainty (or self-uncertainty) is closely related to the previous conceptualizations of followers of toxic leaders. For instance, the previous literature argues that followers of toxic leaders have low maturity (Padilla et al., 2007). Since maturity is defined as obtaining an integrated and socially valued identity (Erikson, 1959), followers’ immaturity implies the absence of a stable self-

concept. Similarly, previous literature suggests that followers of toxic leaders ‘question their place in the world’ (Thoroughgood et al., 2012: 904) and do not have strong value systems that shape their identity. Indeed, values and value systems are a critical component of a person’s worldview and self-concept. According to Rokeach,

‘values are simultaneously components of psychological processes, of social interaction, and of cultural patterning and storage. [...] A value system is an organized set of preferential standards that are used in making selections of objects and actions, resolving conflicts, invoking social sanctions, [...]. Values are components in the guidance of anticipatory and goal-directed behavior, but they are also backward-looking in their frequent service to justify or “explain” past conduct.’ (1979/2008:20)

As individuals’ personal uncertainty increases, their value systems become increasingly ambiguous, and they find it harder to interpret the world and their position in it. Consequently, when personal uncertainty reaches a point at which the ‘previous values no longer provide a valid interpretive framework, the individual will yearn for new values that create order and provide direction as they attempt to make sense of their world’ (Gebert, Heinitz, & Buengeler, 2016: 99). High levels of personal uncertainty, therefore, suggest low levels of symbolic capital and individual worth in a particular field of values and relationships. Toxic illusion answers these individuals’ need for ‘safety, security, group membership, and predictability in an uncertain world’ (Padilla et al., 2007: 183) by providing a vision, clear boundaries, rituals, social structure, and a value system that promises order and a better future for those who participate.

There is an abundance of evidence in the literature regarding leaders’ communication of values, mission and vision, ideologies, and goals and how they are incorporated into the

followers' self-concepts (e.g., Gebert et al., 2016). Although some leaders may provide these tools to their followers unconsciously, others deliberately manage these processes. As Hitler allegedly put it, 'A mass rally is designed to switch off the thinking process. Only then would the people be ready to accept the magical simplifications before which all resistance crumbles' (Fest & Herrendoerfer, 1977). Since one of the key resources in uncertainty reduction is the cognitive capacity (Hogg & Adelman, 2013), toxic leaders design their communications to address the complex problems of (prospective) followers with simple solutions with catchy phrases. In that sense, toxic leaders and the *illusio* promise security and stability through structure, rituals, and rules that make life easier for followers in a complex world. In that sense, the habitus of the toxic *illusio* offers followers symbolic value that enhances their stakes in life. By reducing the uncertainty that followers feel, the toxic *illusio* enables them to abdicate their moral responsibility to tackle difficult questions. Simplicity of the solution shields and legitimates the toxic element in leadership behavior.

Although the degree to which the individual follower transforms these values into action differs for each follower, 'the Manson Family, the Hitler Youth, Castro's Pioneros, and Mao's Red Guards all illustrate the destructive potential of impressionable followers who internalize a destructive leader's message' (Thoroughgood et al., 2012: 904). In any case, the allure of the toxic *illusio* touches upon a personal spot when the individual adopts its worldview and self-concept in order to reduce their personal uncertainty. As an aversive state that reflects directly on an individual's self and identity, personal uncertainty creates the immediate need to clarify who one is. That's why, in the hasty search for answers, the feeling of belonging and the identity that the toxic *illusio* provides becomes fundamental to the very core of the individual. The glorified

and simplified alternatives offered by the toxic leader and illusio might prove to be a lifesaver for an individual who is in search of meaning and symbolic worth in such a revised world view.

Although high personal uncertainty renders individuals more vulnerable to the allure of toxic leaders, not every individual with high personal uncertainty becomes a follower of a particular toxic leader, especially in the absence of a compatible toxic illusio. Albeit strained, an individual's existing perception of self may render joining a toxic illusio infeasible if their current self construct clashes with the toxic leader's proposed worldview and self-concept. For example, a person who supports human rights may not be allured toward a toxic illusio which they believe to endanger some employees' health and safety significantly at the workplace, even when they are having personal uncertainty crises about their professional self.

A conducive field of relations (the environment) also influences the individual's motivation to join the toxic illusio. The field, in that regard, includes not only the institutional context, such as cultural values and checks and balances mechanisms, but also the situational factors, such as instability and perceived threat. In particular, crises in fast-changing fields such as financial, social, cultural, or security that render the environment uncertain for individuals may exacerbate feelings of personal uncertainty (Rast et al., 2013). As such, crisis situations that further limit an individual's access to capitals and power could provide fertile ground in which to cultivate toxic illusio by motivating individuals to reduce their increased personal uncertainty, which in turn translates to support for a toxic leader. It is also important to emphasize that the construct of personal uncertainty, self-concept, and worldview as employed here are domain specific. In other words, an individual may be a player of a toxic illusio in the political domain but can concurrently have a strong value system and identity in work or family domains, and vice versa.

To summarize, we suggest that an individual becomes susceptible to toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io due to their increased personal uncertainty in a given domain, subject to the availability of a toxic leader and a conducive environment. Moreover, we argue that the individual's adoption of the toxic leader's proposed value system is an agentic choice to reduce their personal uncertainty. In other words, individuals with high levels of personal uncertainty may find joining the toxic game and adopting the self-concept and the worldview associated with it more rewarding than the alternatives, including the status-quo. Once they join the game, however, reciprocal social identity processes initiate, and material and social ties of interest become entrenched in their toxic field. As players alter the game, they play with their decisions and actions, and players are also shaped by the toxic leader and the illu<sup>s</sup>io.

### **Playing the Toxic Game**

Toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io consists of a group of players in which the leader and their followers identify with the group through self-categorization. Accordingly, once the illu<sup>s</sup>io takes shape, the socio-cognitive group processes influence the social identity formulations of its members (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2018). According to Tajfel, social identity is the self-awareness as a member of a social group, and it implies group membership as having 'some emotional and value significance' for the member (1972: 292). Social identities enable individuals to identify themselves as part of a certain group, to assimilate the cognitive and behavioral norms of the group, and to discriminate against others who lack membership to this group. Even though all players are co-creators of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), leaders are in a more enabling position to orient social identities (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Indeed, Hogg argues that these social identities and the associated socio-cognitive processes enable leaders to 'emerge, maintain their position, be effective' (2001: 186) due to leader's prototypical, or influential, status. Within

these cognitive processes, leaders are the entrepreneurs of identity whose vision and values spread to the members of the group (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005), thus making the toxic *illusio* viable.

Beyond the social identity ties, toxic *illusio* offers other material, social, cultural, and symbolic resources as well. Toxic leaders use coercive persuasion techniques to further consolidate and homogenize their follower group and to ensure that the players stay committed to the game. Coercive persuasion methods are the ‘discursive systems of constraint that are difficult for followers to challenge and resist’ (Tourish, 2013: 40). Such methods include but are not limited to reference group affiliation, role modeling, peer pressures, alignment of identity, performance assessment, and reward systems (for a detailed discussion of various techniques, please see Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). An example of such practices is the significant use of ‘friend or foe’ rhetoric (Pelletier, 2010). When used effectively, this rhetoric not only introduces an existential threat by an ‘other’ to immediate the necessity of group social identity, but also consolidates the appropriate attitude and behavior expectations of the toxic *illusio* by drawing a clear distinction between the in-group and out-group. The perceived existential threat also legitimizes the toxic leader and the group’s emphasis on loyalty to the group identity, which in turn normalizes the associated reward and punishment systems. As such, coercive persuasion practices demonstrated by toxic leaders achieve their objective on two fronts. First, these discursive systems accelerate the immersion of the player into the toxic game by presenting them with an immediate decision of whether to fully commit to the totality of the rules of the game or to be banished from the game as one of the ‘others. Second, once the player conforms to the game in its entirety, these same discourses provide the clear boundaries and rules that construct

the strong self-concept and worldview that they need to avoid previous high levels of personal uncertainty.

Nevertheless, although toxic leaders are often considered the focal point of the phenomenon, they do not sustain the game alone. Individuals who choose to join the toxic game as a way of reducing their personal uncertainty are also motivated to remain in the game to avoid going back to that initial aversive state. To that end, as Arendt observed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), individuals can disengage themselves from the moral aspects of their actions and hence commit evil acts without necessarily being evil. Moral disengagement, accordingly, can allow the individual to disable the self-regulatory mechanisms that prevent immoral acts through the anticipated self-sanctioning (Bandura, 2002). Indeed, previous research demonstrates that individuals' propensity to morally disengage predicts unethical behavior (Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). In that sense, absorbed by the toxic *illusio*, followers of toxic leaders can continue to have positive moral perceptions about themselves and other players, whilst contributing to the toxic outcomes of the phenomenon individually and collectively by ignoring the moral consequences of their actions.

Furthermore, as toxic processes normalize within the game through their institutionalization, rationalization, and socialization, players may find it even easier to continue business as usual without any experience of moral conflict (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Normalization of toxic habitus numbs the moral aspect of actions, especially when the individual believes such practices are the norm among, and perceived favorably by, the rest of the players. Institutionalized organizational behaviors (collective habitus at work) are defined as 'stable, repetitive and enduring activities that are enacted by multiple organization members without significant thought about the propriety, utility, or nature of the behavior' (Ashforth & Anand,



2003: 4). These behaviors enable players to switch off the trigger for the recognition of the moral aspect of a decision. The rationalization of toxic practices and the game's idiosyncratic rules and norms allows players to justify the toxic practices as normal, which therefore does not require additional thought. As the toxic practices are institutionalized and rationalized, they are also taught to the newcomers as the way things work in the group. This socialization of toxicity might, in fact, turn into a new observable verge between the players of the toxic illusio and 'others' by becoming a part of the group's social identity. In that regard, since players depend strongly on the group social identity, normalization of toxic practices can serve as a catalyst for individuals' moral disengagement from the ethical consequences of individual and collective actions the toxic game requires.

To summarize, once the individual joins the toxic game to reduce their high levels of personal uncertainty, there are a number of dynamics that enable the players to continue playing the game (and even increase their commitment) and hence prolong the lives of the toxic illusio. First of all, once the individual joins the toxic game, group social identity processes further reinforce the essentiality of the illusio to the construction of their selves. As the individual adopts the self-concept and the worldview proposed by the toxic illusio, they start perceiving themselves as one with the game and the other players as a group. Therefore, since these players depend strongly on the social identity and related norms of toxic illusio to avoid high personal uncertainty, it is less likely that they question the ethical aspect of the game. Secondly, toxic leaders employ coercive persuasion techniques to create discursive systems that make it harder for the players to challenge the rules and norms of the game. In addition to establishing clear boundaries between the in-group members and others, these techniques also structure a range of psychological, social, cultural, symbolic, and material motivations (rewards and punishments) within the rules and

dynamics of the toxic game. Thirdly, since the players themselves are motivated to continue playing the game, they ‘deceive themselves about the ethical nature of the issues they face through psychological processes that hide the ethical issues from view’ (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006: 958). Consequently, by ignoring the ethical aspect of their decisions and actions, members of the toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io can maintain a positive perception about their individual and collective actions while contributing to the toxic outcomes of the phenomenon. Finally, normalization of toxic practices within the toxic game further reduces the possibility of players recognizing the moral aspect of any decision or act involved. Indeed, as the initial examples of toxic practices are observed to produce positive results in terms of player’s motivations, more players adopt these practices, and hence the toxicity becomes embedded in the game and its rules and processes (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Once routinized, the actions that are supposed to trigger reflective thoughts on ethics are considered less as discrete decision points, but more as a part of the normal proceedings that do not require any additional thought.

In that regard, as the game continues, these four main dynamics collectively prolong the life of the toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io by making players increasingly resistant to questioning the ethics of the game and its outcomes. In fact, this refusal to question the morality of the rules and the dynamics of the toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io can be mistaken as a lack of agency by observers. The present paper argues against it. We suggest that, once they join the toxic game, players become absorbed in the illu<sup>s</sup>io because they are increasingly motivated to do so. Indeed, once they are settled into their group social identity and rituals, followers are often comfortable in their conformity to the toxic illu<sup>s</sup>io until something disillusion<sup>s</sup> them.

## **To remain or not to remain a player, that's the question**

Toxic leaderships 'achieve surprising longevity' (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b: 11), and one of the main reasons behind their perennity is the sustained support of their followers. It is often puzzling – if not frustrating – for researchers and the general public alike to observe followers of toxic leaders in support of such evil people. But as we have discussed in length within this paper, individuals who join the toxic illuio in order to reduce their high levels of personal uncertainty internalize the self-concept and worldview of the toxic illuio and hence draw their social identity directly from the toxic game and the toxic leader. Moreover, players of the toxic game further commit to the social identity of the toxic illuio by their accumulated choices and behaviors. In other words, in line with the literature on escalation of commitment (Staw, 1981) and Becker's side-bet theory (1960), the choices and behaviors of the players of the toxic game create a track record for each individual, which makes it increasingly costlier for them to dissent and defect from the group practices (Meyer & Allen, 1984). Therefore, as players of the toxic game, these followers are increasingly motivated to maintain their positive moral perception of themselves, the game, and consequently the leader.

Keeping in mind that followers' support is a significant factor in the durability of toxic leadership phenomena, understanding the dynamics behind their tenacity to remain in the toxic illuio is a crucial first step to reduce the toxic effects of the phenomenon. We suggest that when players of the toxic illuio encounter what an outsider would label as a manifestation of the toxicity of the game, they first employ cognitive defense mechanisms to avoid awareness of the moral aspect of the issue (Figure 2 outlines the process of moral decision making for remaining in or leaving the toxic illuio). Motivated to remain within the game and to avoid moral dissonance, players often take refuge in the normalization of the toxicity of the illuio.

Considered to be part of routinized processes instead of particular decision points that require additional ethical pondering, most of the day-to-day instances of toxicity evade any ethical scrutiny by the members of the toxic illusio. In fact, as more toxic practices normalize within the game over time, players may find it easier to ignore even the existence of an ethical question in increasingly toxic routines. As such, providing a post-hoc justification for their judgment only when specifically prompted, players of the toxic game can go through most toxic behaviors without any hint of moral dissonance.

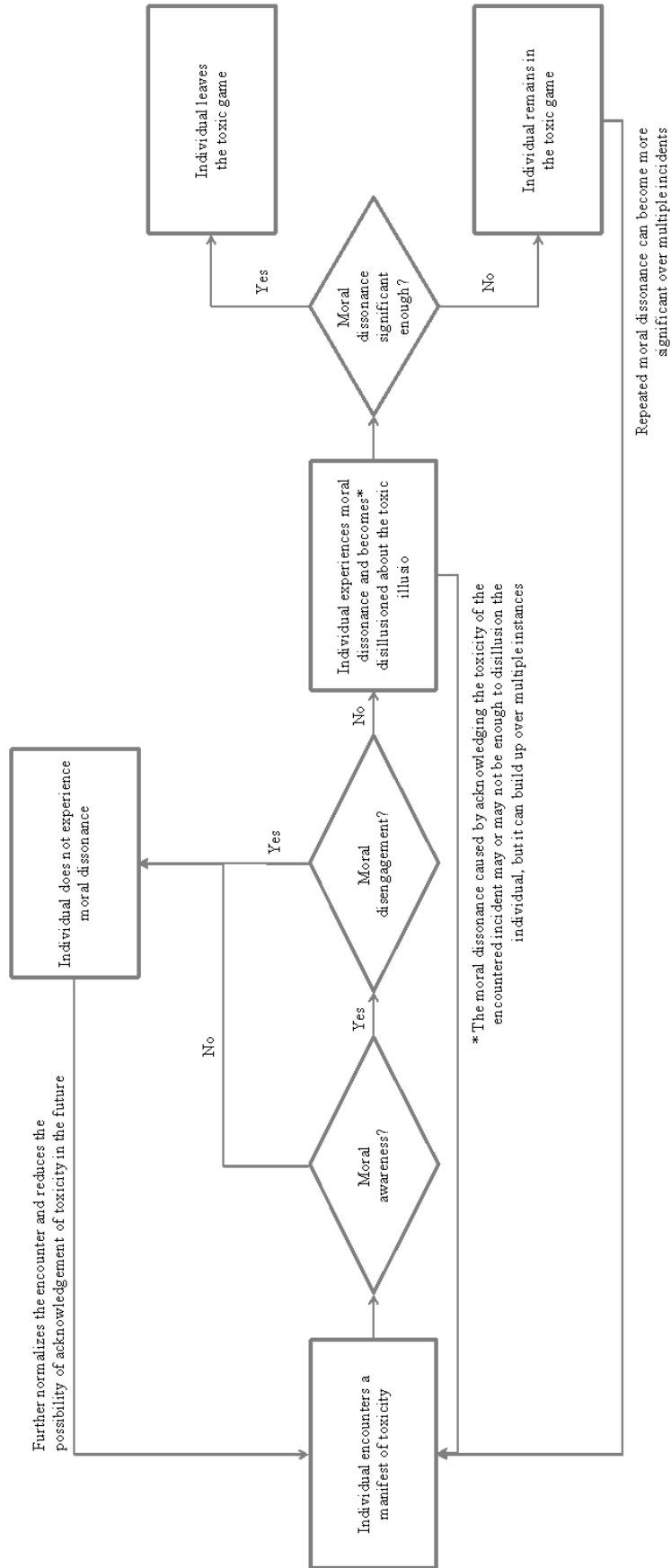


Figure 2: Morality-based process model of followers' continued participation in the toxic game

Nevertheless, not all toxic practices are equally normalized within the toxic illusion, and instances of eliciting situations with high moral intensity can still trigger moral awareness. According to the issue-contingent model by Jones (1991), moral intensity has six components: (i) magnitude of consequences (the overall utility of the moral act), (ii) social consensus (the degree of agreement in the society on that subject), (iii) probability of effect (the probability of the possible harm/benefit of the act realizing), (iv) temporal immediacy (the time between the decision/act and present), (v) proximity (closeness to those involved), and (vi) concentration of effect (strength of consequences for those affected). Therefore, while it's 'easier to harm others when their suffering is not visible and when destructive actions are physically and temporally remote from their injurious effects' (Bandura, 2002: 108), a certain, immediate, and significant harm to people in close relationship with the individual is more likely to trigger a moral consideration.

Once players become aware that they are facing a moral issue, they can still decide to act on their intuition by employing mechanisms of moral disengagement, even when their ethical cognitive framework conflicts with the intuition (Moore et al., 2012). To avoid moral dissonance caused by such conflict, moral disengagement mechanisms offer a wide range of tools to avoid self-sanctions by 'reconstructing conduct as serving moral purposes, obscuring personal agency in detrimental activities, disregarding or misrepresenting the injurious consequences of one's actions, and blaming and dehumanizing the victims' (Bandura, 1990: 28). More specifically, moral disengagement mechanisms have three main categories: (i) performing cognitive reconstruction of the behavior, i.e. moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and advantageous

comparison; (ii) minimizing one's role in the harmful behavior, i.e. displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and disregarding or distorting of the consequences; and (iii) focusing on the targets' unfavorable acts, i.e. dehumanization and attribution of blame (Treviño et al., 2006). Indeed, the wide range of such cognitive mechanisms that enable individuals to avoid self-sanctioning has been studied extensively in the literature, e.g. moral exclusion and inclusion (Opatow, 1990) and moral decoupling (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013). Research demonstrated that 'people can and do engage in processes of moral rationalization and moral decoupling if they are motivated to continue transacting with or supporting entities that have engaged in harmful or immoral behavior' (Pfeffer, 2016: 664). As such, players of the toxic illusio are strongly motivated to morally disengage from the toxicity they observed to maintain the status-quo they enjoy.

While the players employ the above-mentioned cognitive mechanisms to remain in the game without experiencing any moral dissonance, they receive help from both the toxic leader and other members of the toxic illusio. Toxic leaders, as the prototype of the social identity of toxic illusio, provide arguments and discourses to catalyze members' moral disengagement in the case of a moral conflict. Amplified by the collective of the members of the toxic illusio, these arguments and discourses are legitimized by the fellow players and provide convenient tools for moral justification. For example, toxic leaders may resort to self-preservation tactics such as cognitive change and alternative truths (Schütz, 1998) to sustain the support of the members of the toxic illusio.

Cognitive change 'involves selecting which of the many possible meanings will be attached to the situation, reappraising or reinterpreting the situation as having less potential harm to goals, concerns, and well-being.' (Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2016: 87). In that sense, toxic

leaders might use cognitive change tactics to reframe the causes of toxic incidents as well as to alter how players of the toxic illuso feel about it. An example of such cognitive change can be creating an advantageous comparison. Since ‘whenever events occur or are presented contiguously, the first one colors how the second one is perceived and judged’ (Bandura, 1990: 166), toxic leaders can manipulate the cognitive frame of the incident in question by structuring what it is compared against. Instead of changing the cognitive framework of their followers regarding the observed incident of toxicity, toxic leaders can also deliberately lie or distort facts (Pelletier, 2010) to eliminate their followers’ moral dissonance to facilitate their sustained support. Since ‘individuals’ understandings of the world are held as true to the extent that they can be affirmed by some social group’ (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2012: 4), lies spread by the toxic leader circulate between the players of the toxic game and become alternative truths.

Furthermore, previous research provides evidence for individuals’ preference for information that supports their social stereotypes (Johnston, 1996), attitudes (Lundgren & Prislun, 1998), and self-serving conclusions (Holton & Pyszczynski, 1989). This cognitive tendency, referred to as confirmation bias, allows the individual to maintain their original position, ‘even if this position is not justified on the basis of all available information’ (Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001: 557). Individuals who joined the toxic illuso are strongly motivated to justify the toxicity of the eliciting situation that they observed. Such players are likely to prefer the arguments and discourses put forth by the toxic leader, exacerbated by the members of the toxic illuso, to information suggesting the toxicity of the game. In fact, recent research suggests that widespread use of Internet and social media further aggravates such confirmation bias by fostering ‘the aggregation of like-minded people where debates tend to enforce group polarization’ (Del Vicario, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley, & Quattrociocchi, 2017: 1).



To summarize, individuals who join the toxic illusio as a way of reducing their high levels of personal uncertainty have a predisposition to morally disengage from any manifestation of the toxicity of the game, as they are also often provided with enabling arguments and discourses by the toxic leader and other players collectively. Consequently, more often than not, such players can justify a manifestation of toxicity, even when it initially conflicts with their ethical code, and therefore, they may not experience any moral dissonance.

Nevertheless, even for the players who are most engaged with the toxic game, some instances may be so morally intense that the individual's moral disengagement mechanisms can fail to fence off the moral dissonance that is caused by the clash of the observed incident and personal code of ethics. Moral dissonance, in this sense, 'occurs when a person's behavior or general cognitions are in conflict with his/her moral values' (Lowell, 2012: 19). More specifically, moral dissonance is a dimension of cognitive dissonance which is defined as 'a state of tension whenever an individual holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent' (Aronson, 1972: 178). Therefore, as with the case of cognitive dissonance, moral dissonance is felt more acutely when the individual (i) perceives the instance as an irrevocable commitment on their behalf, (ii) can foresee or observe the consequences clearly, (iii) perceive themselves as responsible for the consequences, and (iv) must devote more effort to create the instance in question (Lowell, 2012). In that regard, as the intensity of moral dissonance experienced due to the perceived toxicity of the game increases, players increasingly feel estranged from the social identity of the toxic illusio. Such detachment from values and rules of the game may eventually lead to the individual's disillusionment from the toxic illusio. Since moral dissonance accumulates across multiple instances of perceived toxicity, individual's

disillusionment from the allure of toxic leadership can result from a single, as well as repeated, demonstrations of the toxicity of the game.

Unfortunately, disillusionment of a player does not necessarily mean that they will leave the toxic game. Although the individuals we described in this paper joined the toxic illusion overwhelmingly out of cognitive and psychological needs, as we have discussed in the '*Playing the Toxic Game*' section, they become increasingly embedded in the rules and the dynamics of the toxic game while they remain in the illusion. In other words, throughout the period players participate in the toxic game, they strive toward and/or obtain a status within the toxic illusion. Status, defined as 'the position in a social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference' (Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012), in return, determines the material and social benefits the individual derives from participation. Moreover, since the toxic illusion perpetuates its existence through sustained support of its players, dynamic systems of rewards and punishment are set in place to encourage compliance and inhibit dissent from its members. In that sense, as long as the individual is committed to the toxic game, they invest time, effort, and resources to achieve a higher status among other players as well as to obtain the rewards set forth by the game. In addition to material- or power-related benefits of such status and rewards, individuals can also enjoy the social bonds that are formed based on their social status within the toxic illusion. Consequently, even when individuals join the toxic game only to reduce their personal uncertainty, their decision of whether to leave the game or not includes factors beyond their disillusionment.

More specifically, while a player who experiences moral dissonance due to the perceived toxicity of the game would benefit from leaving the game, it would also cost them their social status within the group and social and material perks from the game. Furthermore, due to the

polarizing nature of toxic leaderships, leaving the game may also result in additional sanctions and hostility from toxic illusio members. In that regard, although the extent depends on the time, effort, and resources the individual spent in the game, players may be motivated to remain in the toxic game, even when they are disillusioned about the social identity it provides.

Based on our discussion above, we conclude that, once the individual joins the toxic illusio, they become increasingly motivated to remain in the game. Indeed, when confronted with a manifestation of the toxicity of the game, players are likely to (i) ignore the ethical aspect of the issue to avoid moral dissonance and (ii) employ moral disengagement mechanisms in case they become aware about the ethical aspect of less normalized and more intense instances of toxicity. Even when their efforts to morally disengage from the issue at hand fail, players can still be dissuaded to remain in the game by their vested interests. Consequently, we suggest that a player of a toxic game would choose to leave the game only if (or when) their moral dissonance exceeds the utility they derive from being a member of the toxic illusio. In that sense, this persistence on behalf of the players allows toxic illusio to survive for longer periods of time, despite their toxicity. Therefore, we believe that a theoretically founded study of the mechanisms that lure in and further engage individuals to toxic illusio is of critical importance to future endeavors to curb the impact of toxic leadership phenomena through follower-focused interventions.

## **Conclusions**

Toxic leadership is one of the most consequential social phenomena that many people encounter daily in different domains of their lives, such as at work or in the political sphere. Followers are the co-creators of this phenomenon as there is no leadership, whether toxic or not, without followers. Yet, we still know very little about followers of toxic leaders. In the present

paper, we build on the literature of toxic leadership, Bourdieu's concepts of *illusio* and capitals and the construct of personal uncertainty in order to take a step forward towards explicating why and how individuals join a toxic *illusio* and decide on whether to remain as followers of a toxic leader. Moreover, we argue that individuals join the toxic *illusio* out of self-interest and that one of their main motivations is to avoid or reduce the personal uncertainty that they feel in that particular domain of their lives. In that sense, the present paper explores how the worldview and self-concept proposed by the toxic *illusio* match the individuals' needs to cope with their personal uncertainty and thereby allure individuals to join the toxic game.

Furthermore, we also discuss the dynamics and mechanisms that take place once the individual joins the toxic game and explore how such mechanisms can prolong the lives of toxic *illusio* by motivating players to remain in the toxic game. Consequently, this paper brings to our attention the extent of the followers' choices and chances in joining, supporting, complying with, or defecting toxic leadership. Our unique framing of the relationship between followers and the toxic *illusio* extends the theory of toxic leadership, shedding light to the particular dynamic of joining and staying in the toxic *illusio* in a way that lends moral agency to the followers as toxic agents who are held partly responsible for the co-construction and sustenance of toxic *illusio*.

Admittedly, we did not spend time on the reciprocity of the identity and the value creation processes between the leader and the followers as a group. It does not mean that reciprocity of identity creation is not important. In fact, the role of follower constraints in the formulation of the group prototype, as well as the evolution of the social identity as a dynamic process, are very much critical to the leadership process. Although it was out of the scope of the current paper, we strongly suggest future research to explore the reciprocal aspect of the co-creation mechanisms between the leader and their followers.

It is also important to note that our narrative review, particularly the variants of toxic leaders and followers explored in this paper, would benefit from gender analyses. Although we do not delve into gender aspects of toxic leadership, we would like to note three concerns that future research should consider. First, women leaders are at a disadvantage in terms of gender role congruence due to gender biases and gendered social expectations in general (Johnson et al., 2008). Therefore, it would be more difficult for women to become toxic leaders as social expectations around how women should behave could prevent followers to hold on to the toxic illu<sup>sio</sup> if the leader is female. Future research may explore male and female forms of toxic leadership in terms of gendered inhibitors and catalysts such as role congruence. Second, as in the example of Theranos that we mentioned earlier, the kind of toxic leadership that women practice, such as toxic envy that led Elizabeth Holmes to imitate Steve Jobs in her attire and self-presentation in this particular case (Carreyrou, 2018), could be different than the toxic leadership practices of men. Future research could explicate gender differences in women and men's practices of toxic leadership, exploring issues of power and privilege. Third, the MeToo movement highlighted women are more likely to suffer from sexual harassment and sexual violence (Veissière, 2018). The rampant and entrenched nature of sexual harassment not only hinders women's path to leadership positions but also shapes how they experience toxicity as the victims. More specifically, even when they are disillusioned with the toxic illu<sup>sio</sup>, let alone challenging the toxic illu<sup>sio</sup> publicly, women might find it harder to exit the game due to systemic coercion, feelings of powerlessness, and oppression mechanisms such as non-disclosure agreements. In that sense, gender might have a profound effect on an individual's experience both when joining and playing in the toxic field as well as in their decision to quit. Future research could explore how gender and power plays out in understanding toxic leaders and their

followers. Although we have not explored gender issues in great depth in this narrative review, we would like to call for future research to focus on how women and men practice toxic leadership and followership to what extent their followers may respond in gendered ways to the toxic illusio.

There are a number of practical implications within our research. We explained that what makes individuals particularly susceptible to join and remain in the toxic illusio is their search for a strong worldview and self-concept. In that sense, it is particularly important to design follower-focused interventions that make individuals less vulnerable to the allure of toxic leadership, so that they do not join the toxic illusion in the first place. We suggest an initial focus on addressing systemic mechanisms that cause alienation, exclusion, alterity, and isolation, which in turn may lead to high levels of personal uncertainty. Any such interventions can attempt to address ‘perceived injustice’ and ‘social bonds’ of individuals, especially for marginalized groups, to avoid high levels of personal uncertainty. In the same vein, interventions such as equality, diversity, inclusion, industrial democracy, and solidarity could strengthen an individual’s identity formation and reduce the chances of individuals’ susceptibility to join a toxic illusio due to personal uncertainty. Based on our conceptual elaboration in this paper, we also suggest future research on mechanisms and dynamics that sustain toxic leadership once individuals join the game, such as coercive tactics of the toxic leader, normalization of toxicity, and moral disengagement of the followers.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize the need for a theoretically founded and organized research program that would systematically explore the mechanisms and dynamics that lead individuals to join and remain in toxic illusio. Indeed, we hope that the present paper can serve as a first step toward such research by framing the followers of toxic leaders as moral

agents that co-create the toxic leadership phenomena and thus enable better informed follower-focused interventions to curb the impact of future toxic leaderships.

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