

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Normalization of toxicity in organizations: A multilevel process framework of toxicity normalization cascade

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34794 Çekmeköy/İstanbul/Türkiye.Email: aybike.mergen@ozyegin.edu.tr**Abstract**

Workplace toxicity imposes enormous costs on employees, organizations, and society, yet scholarship lacks an integrated explanation of how harmful practices become routine and why they endure. This article develops the toxicity normalization cascade (TNC), a multilevel process framework addressing two interrelated questions: how does workplace toxicity become normalized, and why does it persist through leadership changes, regulatory interventions, and sincere reform efforts? Drawing on foundational theories of normalization of deviance and corruption, moral disengagement theory, and structuration theory, TNC traces how four dimensions of organizational context generate systemic pressures that activate psychological mechanisms of normalization. These mechanisms co-evolve through social interaction and crystallize into normalized toxic culture. The framework's central contribution is the reproduction mechanism: the process through which normalized culture feeds back to reconstitute the systemic pressures that enabled its emergence, creating self-perpetuating cascades. Six testable propositions specify the framework's architecture. We present an illustrative application, demonstrate generalizability across organizational contexts, propose a research agenda, and derive practical implications for systemic intervention.

KEYWORDS

moral disengagement, multilevel process theory, normalization of deviance, organizational culture, reproduction mechanism, workplace toxicity

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Practitioner points

- Toxicity normalization is driven by systemic organizational pressures rather than individual moral failings. Leaders must diagnose and reshape the contextual conditions that make toxic practices adaptive.
- Four psychological mechanisms, namely (i) cognitive simplification, (ii) moral rationalization, (iii) identity alignment, and (iv) behavioural entrenchment, follow a modal pathway and enable one another, meaning that interventions targeting a single mechanism are unlikely to succeed.
- Mature normalization cascades become self-perpetuating: normalized culture regenerates the conditions sustaining it, requiring simultaneous multilevel intervention rather than piecemeal reform.
- The framework's mapping of systemic pressures to organizational context dimensions provides leaders with a diagnostic tool for identifying which conditions most urgently require restructuring.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are not inherently toxic. Yet with troubling regularity, respected institutions from century-old banks to innovative technology firms to storied engineering companies descend into dysfunction where harmful practices are tolerated and normalized. Between 2011 and 2016, for example, Wells Fargo employees systematically opened millions of unauthorized customer accounts, transforming fraud from exception into routine expectation (Independent Directors of the Board of Wells Fargo [Independent Directors], 2017). Theranos (Carreyrou, 2018) and Boeing (Robison, 2021) reveal similar patterns, where organizational conditions render harmful practices invisible through their very ordinariness.

Crucially, the core theoretical puzzle is not that toxicity occurs, but that it becomes normal. Prior research has catalogued toxicity's severe consequences and identified antecedents, from abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000) and destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) to organizational injustice (Greenberg, 1990). Scholars have also explained how harmful behaviours spread through social learning (Bandura, 1986), contagion (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), and collective sense-making (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Yet, the field lacks an integrated explanation of normalization itself: how the exceptional becomes routine, how early resistance yields to acceptance, and why such patterns resist reversal. Addressing this gap requires an integrated, multilevel process explanation that specifies how organizational conditions activate psychological mechanisms, and over time, convert episodic deviance into durable norms.

Several foundational perspectives illuminate aspects of this puzzle, each contributing insights that the present framework builds upon and extends. Vaughan's (1996) concept of normalization of deviance revealed how organizations incrementally accept deviations through structural secrecy and shifting interpretive frameworks, establishing that normalization is fundamentally an organizational accomplishment rather than a product of individual moral failure. Ashforth and Anand (2003) deepened this understanding by identifying three mutually reinforcing pillars of normalization – namely, institutionalization, rationalization, and socialization – showing how corruption becomes embedded in organizational structures, justified through self-serving ideologies, and transmitted to newcomers through socialization processes. Research on moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) and ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) has specified the psychological processes through which individuals maintain positive self-concepts while engaging in harmful behaviour. Coleman's (1990) multilevel framework for social explanation provides architectural clarity about how macro-level conditions shape

micro-level action and how individual actions aggregate into macro-level outcomes. And structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) contributes the foundational insight that social structures and human agency are mutually constitutive.

These perspectives offer powerful yet partial explanations, and their respective strengths define the boundaries of what each can illuminate. Vaughan (1996) reveals how normalization begins at the organizational level, creating an opportunity for specifying the psychological micro-foundations through which individuals come to accept what they once recognized as harmful. Ashforth and Anand (2003) identify the pillars sustaining normalized corruption, opening space for theorizing the upstream conditions that generate normalization pressures and for tracing the full multilevel causal pathway from context through psychology to culture. Moral disengagement theory illuminates how individuals rationalize harmful behaviour, yet by treating organizational pressure as exogenous, it leaves open how conditions systematically activate rationalization and how rationalization, once embedded within a broader cascade, becomes collectively validated in ways qualitatively different from individual-level processes. Structuration theory provides the principle of recursiveness at high abstraction, pointing towards the possibility of specifying which particular mechanisms drive reproduction in concrete domains. The theoretical opportunity lies in connecting these complementary insights into a specified multilevel process that explains not only how toxicity becomes normalized but also why it endures.

To address this opportunity, we develop the Toxicity Normalization Cascade (TNC), a multilevel process framework that explains how workplace toxicity becomes normalized and why it endures. We define toxicity normalization as the process through which harmful organizational practices, initially recognized as problematic, progressively come to be accepted as standard and even necessary features of organizational life. TNC traces how four dimensions of organizational context (structural, relational, informational, and temporal) generate systemic pressures that activate psychological mechanisms of normalization. These mechanisms co-evolve through social interaction and crystallize into a normalized toxic culture that, through the reproduction mechanism, feeds back to reconstitute its enabling conditions. The framework adapts Coleman's (1990) multilevel schema into four process mechanism types: situational (organizational pressures shaping individual cognition), action-formation (psychological co-evolution generating toxic behaviour transformational (individual actions aggregating into collective culture), and reproduction (normalized culture reconstructing enabling conditions)).

The TNC framework makes three specific contributions to organizational theory. First, it provides a specified multilevel causal pathway from organizational context through systemic pressures and psychological mechanisms to normalized culture, enabling testable predictions about which organizational configurations create the greatest vulnerability to normalization. Second, it introduces the reproduction mechanism as a fourth mechanism in the multilevel architecture, tracing the concrete feedback pathways through which normalized toxic culture regenerates the pressures sustaining it. Third, it reframes the central explanandum from emergence to persistence: by explaining why normalized toxicity endures through leadership change, regulatory intervention, and sincere reform, TNC addresses the puzzle that has most consistently defied both scholarly explanation and practical intervention.

This article proceeds as follows. We first establish the theoretical foundations from which TNC is constructed, defining workplace toxicity, examining foundational normalization scholarship, developing the organizational context architecture, and establishing the multilevel process framework. We then develop the TNC framework itself, specifying systemic pressures, psychological mechanisms, and cascade process dynamics through six formal propositions. We conclude with an illustrative application to the Wells Fargo cross-selling scandal, comparative analysis establishing generalizability, a research agenda, and practical implications for organizational intervention.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Constructing the TNC framework requires four foundational building blocks: a definition of workplace toxicity that is analytically separable from its consequences, an account of how prior scholarship has

theorized normalization, a multidimensional specification of the organizational context within which normalization unfolds, and a multilevel process architecture capable of connecting macro-level conditions to micro-level adaptation and back again. We develop each in turn.

Workplace toxicity and its normalization

We define workplace toxicity as persistent patterns of behaviour or systemic conditions characterized by disrespect, exclusion, ethical breaches, or abusiveness (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2024; Sull et al., 2022). Unlike constructs that capture specific interpersonal dynamics, such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), or bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011), workplace toxicity denotes systemic organizational conditions that extend beyond dyads to encompass structures and cultures legitimizing harm. Organizational systems can generate such conditions even without overtly malicious intent from individual actors (Frost, 2003), through the accumulation of harmful norms, inequitable structures, and management approaches that prioritize control over human flourishing (Sull et al., 2022). This conceptualization deliberately separates the construct from its consequences, enabling investigation of how toxic conditions become embedded independent of the visible harms they eventually produce.

What makes workplace toxicity a distinctive theoretical puzzle is not its occurrence but its durability. Toxic cultures survive leadership changes, regulatory interventions, and organizational reforms that directly target their most visible symptoms (Sull et al., 2022). This persistence suggests that normalization involves more than incremental habituation; something actively sustains it. It requires a process through which the organizational conditions generating toxicity are themselves reproduced, creating self-sustaining dynamics that resist disruption. Understanding this process demands engagement with scholarship that has examined how deviance and corruption become organizationally normal.

Normalization of deviance and corruption

Vaughan's (1996) analysis of NASA's Challenger disaster introduced the concept of normalization of deviance, demonstrating how organizations incrementally accept deviations from established norms through structural secrecy, managerial interpretive frameworks, and incremental shifts in baselines for acceptable behaviour. This foundational work established that normalization arises primarily from organizational structures and cultures: harmful practices become routine through organizational dynamics rather than reflecting individual moral deficiency alone.

Ashforth and Anand (2003) advanced this insight by identifying three mutually reinforcing pillars through which corruption becomes organizationally embedded. Institutionalization traces how initially tentative corrupt acts become formalized into organizational structures, procedures, and routines, progressing from initial authorization through category-based generalization to self-generating perpetuation. Rationalization encompasses the self-serving ideologies through which organizational members justify corrupt practices, drawing on familiar psychological strategies such as denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Socialization describes how newcomers are inducted into corrupt practices through cooptation (offering incentives for compliance), incrementalism (gradually escalating involvement), and compromise (creating situations of complicity that bind individuals to the system). Critically, Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 37) recognized that these three pillars form what they called 'an unholy trinity that actively resists change', with each pillar reinforcing the others to create a self-sustaining system.

Together, these foundational accounts establish the organizational character of normalization and identify the pillars sustaining it. They also leave three interrelated questions unresolved that any comprehensive framework for toxicity normalization must address.

First, Vaughan's (1996) analysis centres on technical deviance in high-reliability organizations where risks are calculable and norms explicit. Workplace toxicity, by contrast, typically involves moral deviance: violations of dignity, respect, and human flourishing that may have no codified standards against which deviation can be measured (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2024). The absence of explicit benchmarks means that the normalization of toxicity cannot be detected through the same structural indicators that revealed deviance at NASA. This creates a need for understanding the psychological processes through which moral baselines shift, an account that Vaughan's (1996) organizational-level analysis does not provide.

Second, the foundational accounts establish *that* organizational conditions produce normalization but are less precise about *how*: through which psychological processes individuals come to accept what they once recognized as harmful. Vaughan's (1996) powerful organizational-level insight and Ashforth and Anand's (2003) three pillars both describe what normalization accomplishes without fully specifying the micro-level mechanisms through which it operates. Moreover, while Ashforth and Anand (2003) acknowledge that organizational conditions facilitate corruption, their framework treats these conditions as background enablers rather than theorizing their structure: they identify factors such as competitive pressures, strong group identification, and organizational complexity, but do not specify how these conditions relate to one another, which pressures they generate, or through which mechanisms they activate the pillars. The micro-foundations of normalization, that is, the causal pathway from specific organizational conditions through individual psychological adaptation to collective cultural change, remain to be specified.

Third, both accounts trace primarily forward-moving processes: from initial conditions through incremental acceptance to established deviance and embedded corruption. This leaves open the question of what happens after normalization is achieved. How do normalized patterns actively reproduce themselves across time, surviving the turnover of the very individuals who participated in the original normalization? Ashforth and Anand (2003) recognized the self-perpetuating tendency of their three pillars but did not trace the specific multilevel pathways through which this reproduction operates. The puzzle of persistence, why normalized toxicity endures through leadership changes, regulatory interventions, and organizational reform, requires a theoretical account of reproduction, not only emergence.

The multidimensional architecture of organizational context

Addressing these unresolved questions requires specifying the organizational context within which normalization unfolds. Contemporary organizations face conditions that reshape how normalization operates. Organizations increasingly function under what Lupu and Liu (2025) describe as relentless organizational tempo, where formal timekeeping systems, performance management structures, and cultural expectations of constant availability merge into an all-encompassing acceleration regime. Algorithmic management systems reshape control and visibility through constant surveillance and automated evaluation, making certain behaviours hyper-visible while rendering others opaque (Kellogg et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Cultural narratives glorifying overwork normalize exhaustion and frame boundary violations as dedication rather than dysfunction (Lupu & Liu, 2025). These contemporary conditions suggest that normalization may operate through different mechanisms or at different speeds than Vaughan (1996) observed.

The theoretical gap, therefore, is a multilevel process framework that specifies how contextual conditions shape individual-level acceptance and how that acceptance aggregates to reproduce toxic patterns across organizational levels and over time. Addressing this gap requires both specification of organizational context and multilevel theoretical architecture capable of explaining micro-level psychological adaptation, meso-level social coordination, and macro-level institutional reproduction.

Organizational context shapes behaviour through multiple dimensions operating simultaneously (Johns, 2006). Drawing on institutional theory (Scott, 2014) and contemporary theories of acceleration (Rosa, 2013), we conceptualize organizational context as comprising four fundamental dimensions:

structural, relational, informational, and temporal. These dimensions are not merely descriptive categories but theoretically derived aspects of organizational life that create the conditions within which toxicity normalization unfolds.

Scott's (2014) institutional pillars provide the basis for three dimensions of organizational context. The regulative pillar, which encompasses rules, governance systems, and monitoring mechanisms, corresponds to our structural dimension, including hierarchies and performance systems that distribute power and accountability. Contemporary forms include algorithmic management, where data-driven architectures distribute supervisory authority through automated surveillance and evaluation (Kellogg et al., 2020). The normative pillar aligns with our relational dimension, covering networks, trust patterns, and psychological contracts that shape voice and interpretation of experiences. The cultural-cognitive pillar maps onto our informational dimension, where shared beliefs and interpretive frameworks influence how performance is understood (Kaplan, 2008).

A fourth, temporal dimension extends institutional theory through Rosa's (2013) concept of social acceleration, showing how stability requires continuous growth and intensification. This appears through compressed decision timelines, accelerated work rhythms, and shrinking opportunities for reflection. Organizational tempo synchronizes formal time systems, advancement structures, and cultural expectations into what amounts to a totalizing temporal regime (Lupu & Liu, 2025). This temporal dimension interacts with the others: structural pressures intensify under short deadlines, relational trust declines when time for interaction is scarce, and informational processing becomes superficial when reflection is constrained (Zaheer et al., 1999). Together, these four dimensions offer a comprehensive yet parsimonious macro-level architecture, capturing how competitive intensity manifests as performance pressures, peer comparisons, market framings, and temporal acceleration.

Towards a multilevel process framework

Explaining how toxicity becomes normalized requires process theorization (Langley, 1999). Process theories explain how outcomes emerge through sequences of events, asking how normalization unfolds and tracing temporal progression through which ordinary conditions transform into extraordinary outcomes. Normalization is fundamentally temporal and sequential: it occurs through gradual shifts rather than instantaneous transitions, involves feedback between levels where individual actions reshape contexts that then reshape subsequent actions, and exhibits path dependence where early choices constrain later options (Sydow et al., 2009).

Process explanation requires specifying mechanisms as the causal processes through which outcomes are generated (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010). To address the challenge of explaining how macro-level structures produce macro-level outcomes when action occurs at the micro level, we draw on Coleman's (1990) multilevel framework, widely known as the 'Coleman boat' or 'bathtub model'. This framework offers a parsimonious schema for disaggregating complex social phenomena into three distinct mechanism types, each operating at a specific level transition. Situational mechanisms explain how macro-level conditions shape individual beliefs, preferences, and constraints (the macro-to-micro link). Action-formation mechanisms capture how those beliefs and constraints generate specific individual behaviours (the micro-to-micro link). Transformational mechanisms describe how individual actions aggregate into emergent collective outcomes (the micro-to-macro link). This tripartite architecture has become foundational in analytical sociology and mechanism-based organizational research because it provides clarity about what must be explained at each level and how levels connect (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).

Coleman's (1990) framework was developed primarily for explaining how existing macro-level structures produce observable outcomes at a single point in time. For phenomena involving normalization and institutionalization, its elegant single-traversal architecture proves insufficient. The framework traces one macro–micro–macro pass: from conditions through individual action to outcomes. But normalization does not stop there. The outcomes reshape the originating conditions, and

the whole process begins again on altered terrain. Coleman's framework, as originally formulated, has no mechanism for this feedback. Institutional theory describes such reproduction in general terms (for example, isomorphism, path dependence), and structuration theory posits the recursiveness of structure and agency at high abstraction (Giddens, 1984). TNC extends Coleman's (1990) framework with a fourth mechanism type, the reproduction mechanism, which specifies the concrete pathways through which this feedback operates in the domain of toxicity normalization. We develop this extension in detail below.

We should be transparent about the scope of our engagement with structuration theory. TNC draws specifically on Giddens' (1984) foundational insight that social structures are both the medium and outcome of human action, producing a recursive relationship in which today's outcomes become tomorrow's conditions. This principle of recursiveness motivates our reproduction mechanism. However, we do not attempt a full structuration analysis, which would require sustained engagement with Giddens' (1984) concepts of practical consciousness, discursive consciousness, ontological security, and the stratification model of the agent. Our framework's primary analytical architecture derives from Coleman's (1990) multilevel framework rather than from structuration theory. We draw on Giddens (1984) selectively for the recursiveness principle while developing TNC's specific content (which dimensions, pressures, mechanisms, and pathways drive reproduction) through engagement with organizational psychology, institutional theory, and research on moral cognition. This selective borrowing is deliberate: structuration theory provides the insight that reproduction occurs, while TNC specifies how it occurs in the domain of toxicity normalization.

With these foundations in place, we turn to the TNC framework itself.

THE TOXICITY NORMALIZATION CASCADE

Figure 1 presents the TNC framework's multilevel architecture. The framework comprises three layers of content and four types of process mechanism connecting them. At the macro level, organizational context generates systemic pressures that constitute the proximate triggers of normalization. At the micro level, psychological mechanisms are activated by these pressures and co-evolve through social interaction. At the emergent macro level, aggregated micro-interactions crystallize into normalized toxic culture. The framework's distinctive feature is the reproduction mechanism, through which normalized culture regenerates the very systemic pressures from which it arose, closing the loop into a self-perpetuating cascade.

Systemic pressures: The proximate triggers of normalization

The transformation of toxicity from episodic misconduct into institutionalized routine occurs when organizational structure generates acute, lived conditions that constrain cognition and channel behaviour towards path-dependent outcomes. These conditions function as the crucial bridge between macro-institutional logics and micro-psychological adaptations (Greenwood et al., 2011), rendering toxic responses among the most adaptive paths forward for individuals navigating their organizational contexts.

Four such pressures emerge recurrently: environmental uncertainty, power asymmetry, temporal compression, and social density. Each contextual dimension has a primary generative relationship with one systemic pressure: the informational dimension primarily generates environmental uncertainty, the structural dimension primarily generates power asymmetry, the temporal dimension primarily generates temporal compression, and the relational dimension primarily generates social density (see Figure 1). While each dimension is the primary generator of one pressure, pressures can be amplified by conditions across multiple dimensions. The pressures themselves are enduring organizational phenomena grounded in foundational scholarship. We illustrate their operation through diverse organizational examples, including contemporary employment practices that amplify their intensity.

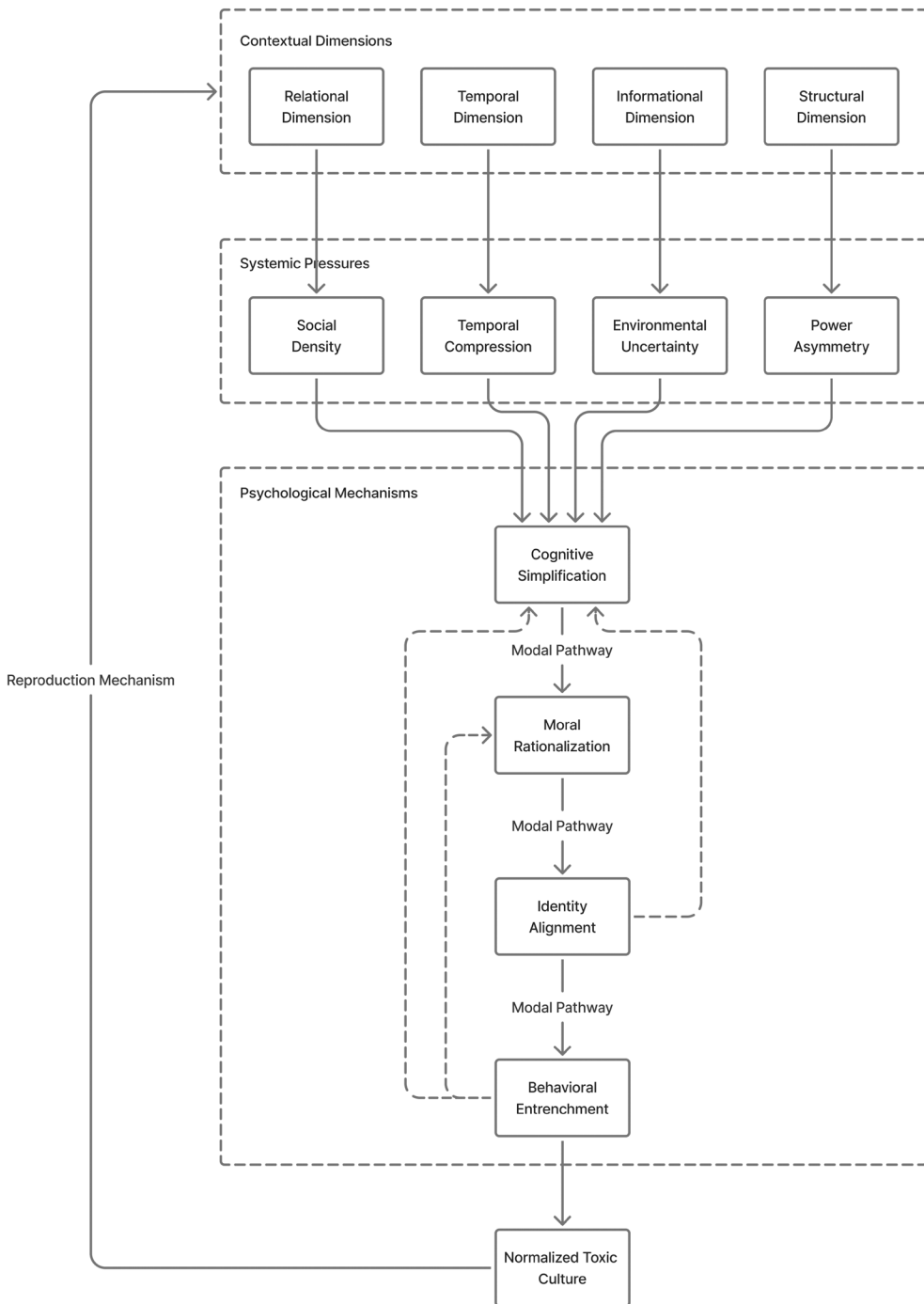


FIGURE 1 The toxicity normalization cascade: multilevel architecture.

Environmental uncertainty

Environmental uncertainty is the lived experience of profound ambiguity about what is happening, what it means, and how one should respond (Milliken, 1987). It arises from multiple sources: competing institutional logics that render performance cues equivocal (Besharov & Smith, 2014),

dynamic and rapidly changing market conditions that outpace organizational sense-making (Weick, 1995), ambiguous mandates where organizational goals are vaguely defined or internally contradictory, and information environments where the sheer volume and complexity of available data overwhelm interpretive capacity. Attention becomes scarce under such conditions, and actors gravitate towards the clearest, most measurable signals, even when those signals distort ethical priorities (Ocasio, 1997).

Contemporary organizational conditions illustrate how environmental uncertainty manifests in practice. Metric proliferation creates framing contests where different measures compete to define success, systematically channelling attention towards quantifiable outputs at the expense of qualitative dimensions like trust or ethical conduct (Kaplan, 2008). Continuous revision of policies and priorities compounds the difficulty of sense-making, as employees must repeatedly recalibrate expectations in the face of shifting organizational demands (Bordia et al., 2004). The result is that employees face conflicting definitions of competent work and struggle to discern authentic organizational priorities.

Power asymmetry

Power asymmetry arises when formal authority, resource control, and voice are distributed so unevenly that dependence becomes a primary mechanism of behavioural regulation (Emerson, 1962). It extends beyond simple hierarchy to describe structural conditions where one actor's power derives directly from another's vulnerability to job loss, social exclusion, or information deprivation (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Power asymmetry is further amplified by information control, where management's monopoly over the logic connecting employee inputs to organizational outputs creates structural dependency, fostering powerlessness and rendering resistance strategically futile (Kellogg et al., 2020; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Contemporary employment practices illustrate how power asymmetry operates. Algorithmic management systems embed supervisory authority in data-driven architectures, creating distributed coercion regimes where compliance is enforced by opaque, automated systems that render resistance futile and accountability diffuse (Kellogg et al., 2020). This transformation replaces the bureaucratic iron cage with an invisible cage of constant surveillance and algorithmic evaluation, where workers experience control without clear controllers (Rahman, 2021). Digital performance management systems make power asymmetry both more pervasive and more impersonal by creating information asymmetries where workers see only fragments of evaluation criteria while management maintains comprehensive, real-time visibility (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Organizations increasingly employ coercive bureaucracy, where formal procedures exact compliance through continuous, automated monitoring and sanctioning (Adler & Borys, 1996).

Temporal compression

Temporal compression is the pervasive experience of accelerated pace and chronic time scarcity that systematically erodes capacity for reflection, deliberation, and ethical reasoning (Perlow, 1999). It reflects what Rosa (2013) identifies as the shrinking present: a societal imperative for continuous acceleration that organizations internalize through relentless deadlines, real-time monitoring, and performance cycles, prioritizing speed over substance. When temporal rhythms outpace cognitive processing capacities, individuals default to heuristics, routines, and instrumental shortcuts because the system denies them temporal slack required for moral consideration (Shalvi et al., 2012). Research on organizational tempo reveals how this operates: when formal timekeeping, career advancement, and cultural expectations of availability are all calibrated to the same accelerating rhythm, deceleration becomes structurally impossible for individual employees (Lupu & Liu, 2025).

Organizations increasingly become locked in what researchers identify as a speed trap, where they produce ever more urgency as the solution to problems created by previous acceleration, generating self-reinforcing cycles (Perlow et al., 2002). Digital tools operationalize pace as performance through algorithmic task allocation, micro-deadlines, and real-time cycle-time recording that treats any temporal slack as inefficiency to be eliminated (Kellogg et al., 2020).

Social density

Social density is pressure generated by intense, frequent, and highly visible interpersonal interactions within tightly interconnected networks (Monge & Contractor, 2003). It extends beyond mere proximity to describe organizational conditions where behaviour is continuously observed, compared, and normatively evaluated by peers and supervisors alike (Bernstein, 2012). Contemporary workplaces intensify this through open-plan designs eliminating private spaces, persistent digital communication creating permanent records of all interaction, and shared performance dashboards making individual results visible to entire teams. These arrangements create a regime where surveillance is distributed across the social fabric rather than concentrated in formal monitors, making private dissent nearly impossible and conformity the path of least resistance (Sewell & Barker, 2006).

Bernstein (2012) identifies a transparency paradox in such environments: workplace designs valorizing collaboration through open offices often inadvertently reduce private interaction while increasing electronically mediated coordination, eliminating pockets of privacy that traditionally enabled confidential dissent. Electronic performance monitoring further tightens the link between observation and evaluation through keystroke tracking, call-time monitoring, and reply-latency measurement (Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015). Conformity occurs in such environments not primarily through explicit pressure but through internalized awareness that all behaviour is visible and subject to collective judgement.

Together, these four pressures constitute the proximate context in which toxicity normalization takes root. They are not deterministic: not all organizations experiencing these pressures normalize toxicity, and the same pressure levels may produce different outcomes depending on other factors. However, they create systemic vulnerabilities that make activation of harmful psychological mechanisms not only likely but adaptive from the perspective of individuals navigating their organizational realities.

Core psychological mechanisms: The micro-foundations of normalization

The TNC framework operates through four core psychological mechanisms: cognitive simplification, moral rationalization, identity alignment, and behavioural entrenchment. What makes these mechanisms theoretically consequential is precisely their ordinariness. Simplifying complex situations, justifying difficult choices, aligning with one's workgroup, and developing efficient routines are fundamental adaptive responses to environmental strain. Under sustained systemic pressure, however, these same processes become the engines of normalization.

Although analytically distinct, these four mechanisms operate at different layers of human functioning. Cognitive simplification is primarily epistemic, shaping how individuals perceive and interpret complexity. Moral rationalization operates at the evaluative level, recalibrating ethical judgements about actions. Identity alignment concerns the incorporation of emerging norms into the self-concept and social identity. Behavioural entrenchment reflects the routinization of action through repetition and habit formation. This layered distinction allows the framework to avoid conceptual redundancy while explaining how cognition, evaluation, identity, and action become progressively aligned in the normalization process.

Cognitive simplification

Cognitive simplification encompasses mental strategies individuals and groups deploy to reduce overwhelming complexity and conserve limited cognitive resources. Faced with ambiguity or time scarcity, people naturally rely on heuristics, pre-existing schemas, and binary narratives to render their environment intelligible and actionable (Kahneman, 2011; Simon, 1955). This process is a necessary adaptation to bounded rationality, allowing efficient decision-making when comprehensive analysis would be impossible. Yet, when activated by environmental uncertainty or temporal compression, simplification systematically filters out nuance, particularly ethical nuance requiring careful deliberation. Complex human interactions are reduced to instrumental categories (for example, a customer becomes 'a sales target' rather than 'a person with needs') and moral dilemmas are recast as technical problems with clear, expedient solutions (Butterfield et al., 2000). In extreme form, this myopia facilitates what scholars identify as dehumanization, where others are perceived not as full moral agents but as obstacles or resources, making their mistreatment psychologically tenable (Haslam, 2006). Recent research reveals how such dehumanization emerges from organizational conditions that treat employees as instruments, which shapes how those employees perceive others in turn (Baldissarri & Fourie, 2023).

Moral rationalization

Moral rationalization is the process by which individuals and groups cognitively reframe ethically questionable conduct to align it with their self-concept as moral actors. Rooted in the need to resolve cognitive dissonance arising when behaviour contradicts values (Festinger, 1957), this mechanism allows people to engage in harmful behaviour without experiencing debilitating guilt or shame. Its operation is elaborated in moral disengagement theory, which details specific tactics: moral justification recasts harmful acts as serving worthy purposes, euphemistic labelling sanitizes unethical behaviour through benign language, and displacement of responsibility attributes agency to authorities or circumstances (Bandura, 1999). Recent reviews confirm these processes are pervasive in ordinary organizational life, where they serve to legitimize exploitation by recasting it as opportunity, necessity, or even care (Newman et al., 2020). Power asymmetry emerges as a potent catalyst: those in authority impose legitimizing narratives that subordinates internalize, while subordinates rationalize compliance as loyalty or survival when alternatives appear unavailable (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

Within the TNC framework, moral disengagement operates in a qualitatively different manner from the individual-level process that Bandura (1999) originally theorized. Three features distinguish cascade-embedded disengagement from its individual-level counterpart. First, it is accelerated by cognitive simplification: when organizational pressures have already stripped situations of ethical complexity, the cognitive work required for moral disengagement is substantially reduced. Second, disengagement becomes collectively validated through social density. In Bandura's original formulation, individuals must maintain self-serving interpretations in the face of potentially challenging external feedback. Within a mature cascade, the dense social networks provide continuous reinforcement for disengagement narratives, transforming individual rationalization into collectively endorsed organizational common sense. Third, cascade-embedded disengagement becomes structurally self-reinforcing through the reproduction mechanism: the rationalization narratives generated by moral disengagement shape the organizational policies and reward systems that, in turn, create conditions making further disengagement more likely.

Identity alignment

People need to belong, to feel validated, and to maintain a coherent self-narrative (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identity alignment is the process through which these needs bind an

individual's sense of self to a collective identity tied to the organization or workgroup. In high-pressure environments, individuals seek stability by conforming to perceived norms of successful in-groups, internalizing not just behaviours but underlying values and beliefs (Ashforth, 2001). The result can include role embracement as a close attachment between self and role (Goffman, 1961) alongside experimentation with provisional selves as employees test and refine role-consistent personas during adaptation (Ibarra, 1999). Social density intensifies this process by making identity performance highly visible and subject to peer validation or sanction, creating strong pressures towards conformity (Hogg, 2001). Over time, this alignment leads to profound erosion of personal ethical boundaries, as the group's norms become the individual's moral compass, a process occurring gradually and often without conscious awareness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Behavioural entrenchment

Once an action has been repeated often enough, it no longer requires a decision. Behavioural entrenchment is the process by which discrete actions crystallize into automatic, self-perpetuating routines through repetition, reinforcement, and lack of critical reflection. Research on habit formation shows how repeated actions become encoded as automatic responses (Wood & R nger, 2016), while work on organizational routines demonstrates how patterns become institutionalized independent of the individuals who initially created them (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Temporal compression emerges as a key driver, as time pressure encourages reliance on familiar scripts when novel responses would require cognitive resources that are not available. Social density facilitates rapid diffusion through observational learning where successful patterns are quickly copied (Bandura, 1986). Once entrenched, these behaviours bypass ethical deliberation entirely, operating as ready-made responses to recurring situations. This creates powerful path dependence, where early patterns of action constrain future possibilities and generate strong resistance to change (Sydow et al., 2009).

Together, these four mechanisms form the psychological core of the cascade. They are activated by systemic pressures, but their true power lies in their co-evolutionary synergy. Under initial pressure exposure, the mechanisms tend to follow a modal pathway: cognitive simplification typically precedes moral rationalization, as stripping situations of ethical complexity creates the cognitive conditions under which rationalization becomes psychologically tenable. Rationalization in turn facilitates identity alignment by providing the justificatory narrative that resolves dissonance between self-concept and behaviour. And aligned identity motivates the repeated performance of now-justified behaviours that crystallizes into behavioural entrenchment. However, this modal pathway describes the most common initial sequence, not a necessary or invariant order. As the cascade matures, reciprocal influences intensify: behavioural entrenchment can deepen cognitive simplification when habitual action reduces the motivation for careful deliberation, identity alignment can accelerate cognitive simplification when a fused organizational identity narrows interpretive categories, and moral rationalization can reinforce identity alignment as legitimizing narratives become incorporated into self-concept. Co-evolutionary synergy increasingly dominates over sequential ordering, creating a mutually reinforcing psychological system in which each mechanism both enables and is enabled by the others.

The Cascade process dynamics: From pressure to normalization

Having defined the psychological mechanisms, we now trace how they connect across levels through four interconnected process mechanisms adapted from Coleman's (1990) multilevel model (see Figure 2; see also the dynamic arrows in Figure 1).

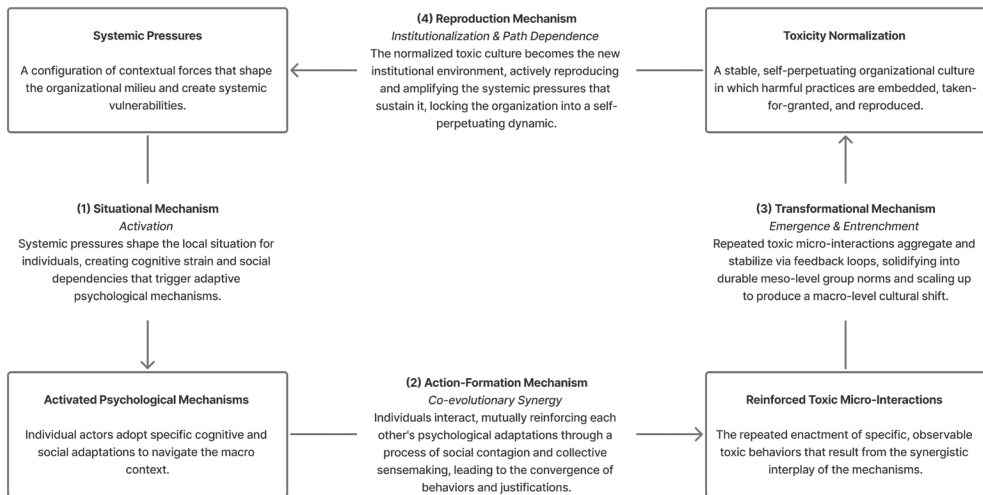


FIGURE 2 Process mechanisms of the toxicity normalization cascade.

The situational mechanism: From systemic pressure to psychological activation

The cascade begins with the situational mechanism, the macro-to-micro linkage translating organizational-level systemic pressures into immediate, lived context that shapes individual cognition and behaviour (Coleman, 1990). The pressures do not cause normalization directly. Rather, they create conditions making specific psychological mechanisms the most adaptive responses for organizational members navigating their circumstances (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010). Consider two of the clearest activation pathways. Environmental uncertainty creates cognitive overload so profound that simplification becomes the only viable path to functional decision-making (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). When everything is ambiguous, people reach for whatever is concrete, and what is concrete in most organizations is the metric on the screen. Power asymmetry engineers structural dependency where moral rationalization emerges as the primary tool for resolving dissonance between ethical self-concept and organizational survival demands (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). The remaining pressures operate through analogous logic: temporal compression depletes the cognitive slack required for deliberation, channelling behaviour into automatic routines (Shalvi et al., 2012), while social density makes non-conformity costly through continuous observation, driving identity alignment as individuals seek belonging within visible networks where deviants face ostracism (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Williams, 2007).

When these pressures eliminate meaningful alternatives, obscure ethical guideposts, and make deviation visible and costly, individuals are not making free choices from equally viable options but navigating a constrained adaptive landscape where the cascade's psychological mechanisms represent the most efficient, least painful paths forward. The situational mechanism thus establishes organizational conditions as the causal engine of the cascade. This leads to our first proposition:

Proposition 1. (*Activation*). *Systemic pressures generated by organizational context temporally precede and probabilistically activate psychological mechanisms of normalization. As environmental uncertainty, power asymmetry, temporal compression, and social density intensify, cognitive simplification, moral rationalization, identity alignment, and behavioural entrenchment become increasingly likely as adaptive responses among organizational members navigating their circumstances.*

This proposition is probabilistic rather than deterministic: the same pressure configurations may produce different outcomes depending on countervailing forces, such as ethical leadership, institutional safeguards, or individual moral courage. Its testable implication is that increases in the four systemic

pressures should predict increased activation of psychological normalization mechanisms, while their reduction should correspond with decreased activation.

The framework's architecture also specifies structured relationships between organizational dimensions and the pressures they generate:

Proposition 2. *(Primary Generative Relationships). Each contextual dimension has a primary generative relationship with a corresponding systemic pressure: the informational dimension primarily generates environmental uncertainty, the structural dimension primarily generates power asymmetry, the temporal dimension primarily generates temporal compression, and the relational dimension primarily generates social density. While each dimension is the primary generator of one pressure, pressures can be amplified by conditions across multiple dimensions.*

This proposition preserves the framework's analytical precision (each dimension has a primary causal pathway to one pressure) while acknowledging that organizational reality involves cross-dimensional amplification. The proposition is empirically tractable because it predicts that changes in a specific contextual dimension should most strongly affect its corresponding pressure, with weaker amplification effects across other pressures.

The action-formation mechanism: Co-evolutionary synergy of mechanisms

Once activated, psychological mechanisms engage in dynamic, recursive interplay constituting the action-formation mechanism, the micro-level process through which individual adaptations are socially coordinated into reinforced toxic micro-interactions (Coleman, 1990). What the action-formation mechanism adds to the individual-level dynamics described above is the social dimension: each step in the modal pathway is not merely an intra-psychic transition but a socially mediated one. Cognitive simplification is reinforced when colleagues adopt the same reductive frames; moral rationalization gains force when legitimizing narratives are echoed by supervisors and peers. Social validation is what makes these adaptations durable. An individual who privately rationalizes a questionable practice remains vulnerable to doubt, but an individual surrounded by colleagues who share and reinforce the same rationalization experiences it as objective reality rather than self-deception. As identity alignment deepens through visible social validation and behavioural entrenchment accelerates through collective performance of routinized practices (Wood & R nger, 2016), parallel individual adaptations are transformed into collectively reinforced toxic micro-interactions.

This co-evolutionary synergy is amplified through social interaction operating as complex contagion rather than simple transmission (Centola, 2018). Unlike viruses spreading through single contact points, toxic norms require reinforcement from multiple, trusted sources within dense social networks to become fully legitimized and enacted. Adoption occurs when employees observe success through visible performance metrics, hear rationalization from managers who control their fate, see celebration in team huddles and on leaderboards, and recognize that peers who resist are marginalized or terminated. This multi-source validation transforms tentative individual adaptation into a collectively endorsed social script.

Proposition 3. *(Co-evolutionary Dynamics). Once activated, psychological mechanisms co-evolve through mutually reinforcing relationships. Under initial pressure exposure, the mechanisms tend to follow a modal pathway from cognitive simplification through moral rationalization and identity alignment to behavioural entrenchment. As the cascade matures, reciprocal influences among all four mechanisms intensify, and co-evolutionary synergy increasingly dominates over sequential ordering, such that the combined effect of co-occurring mechanisms exceeds their individual sum.*

This proposition captures two distinct temporal dynamics. In early cascade stages, the modal pathway describes the most common sequence. In mature cascades, the mechanisms operate as a mutually

reinforcing system where the distinction between cause and effect progressively dissolves. The proposition predicts that interventions targeting a single mechanism should prove less effective than those addressing multiple mechanisms simultaneously, particularly in mature cascades where synergistic effects are strongest.

The transformational mechanism: Emergence and entrenchment of a toxic culture

The reinforced toxic micro-interactions, once established through action-formation mechanisms, aggregate and scale up to become a new, macro-level organizational reality: a normalized toxic culture (Coleman, 1990). This is a process of emergence where collective patterns produce properties (shared norms, stable routines, common languages of justification) that are not present in any single interaction and cannot be reduced to individual intentions (Sawyer, 2005). Over time, these emergent properties become entrenched through institutionalization and path dependence as patterns become codified, resources get allocated to support them, and organizational memory preserves them across personnel changes. Toxic behaviours are codified into informal best practices that newcomers learn through socialization, embedded in onboarding rituals that teach 'how things are done here', and legitimized by their apparent success in meeting organizational goals as defined by existing metrics (Sydow et al., 2009; Vaughan, 1996).

This transformation can involve phase transition where quantitative increases in frequency and acceptance of toxic micro-interactions lead to qualitative shifts in the organization's cultural identity. Research on tipping points in social conventions demonstrates that once a committed minority reaches a critical threshold, established norms can shift rapidly and irreversibly (Centola et al., 2018; Granovetter, 1978). Although this evidence derives primarily from experimental settings, the underlying threshold logic applies broadly to norm change in organizations, where similar dynamics of critical mass and cascading adoption have been documented (Granovetter, 1978). At a critical threshold, the organization's baseline for acceptable conduct fundamentally shifts. This new equilibrium is stabilized by powerful feedback loops: the entrenched culture shapes resource allocation decisions that reward conformity, performance metrics that measure success according to toxic norms, and promotion decisions that elevate those who most embody the toxic culture into positions where they design future systems (Arthur, 1989).

Proposition 4. *(Emergence and Phase Transition). Repeated toxic micro-interactions aggregate through social contagion into shared group norms that, upon reaching critical adoption thresholds, produce qualitative shifts in organizational culture. These phase transitions transform what was once recognized as deviant into taken-for-granted standard practice, creating emergent cultural properties that are stabilized by feedback loops linking resource allocation, performance metrics, and promotion decisions to the normalized toxic norms.*

The concept of phase transition explains why normalization often appears sudden to outside observers despite emerging gradually from within. Before the threshold, toxic practices are recognized as deviant by most members, even if tolerated. After the threshold, the burden of justification reverses: it is no longer those engaging in toxic behaviour who must explain themselves, but those who question it.

The reproduction mechanism: Closing the loop of a self-perpetuating system

Understanding normalization's persistence requires explicating the reproduction mechanism: the macro-to-macro feedback loop through which normalized toxic culture actively reconstructs the very conditions that enabled its emergence (Giddens, 1984). A normalized toxic culture is not a static endpoint but a dynamic, generative state. Consider two illustrative pathways. A culture of unquestioning

obedience to authority reinforces power asymmetry by marginalizing dissenting voices and promoting leaders who embody the toxic norm into positions where they design future structures. Over time, the people who built the system are gone, but the system they built selects for their replacements. A culture celebrating visible performance metrics creates a subtler effect, a paradox of selective certainty: while normalization reduces behavioural uncertainty for organizational members (who now know clearly what is expected and rewarded), it simultaneously intensifies interpretive uncertainty about the organization's authentic purposes and the relationship between internal metrics and external success. As the gap between espoused values and enacted practices widens, employees face growing ambiguity about which organizational reality is genuine, fuelling the cognitive simplification that sustains the cascade. Analogous dynamics operate through temporal compression (where overwork cultures design systems eliminating slack) and social density (where performance-tracking cultures make deviation increasingly visible and costly).

This process of reproduction represents institutional path dependence in its most consequential form (Mahoney, 2000). The organization becomes its own architect of constraint, systematically selecting for structures, strategies, and people compatible with its toxic equilibrium while filtering out those that are not through hiring practices favouring cultural fit, promotion systems rewarding toxic behaviours, and attrition processes driving out dissenters (Schneider, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These dynamics create systemic traps where well-intentioned efforts to change culture are consistently undermined by structures that the culture has produced (Senge, 1990). New policies operate within established reward systems continuing to incentivize toxic behaviours. Reformed leadership inherits organizational cultures constraining their decision-making through unwritten norms, established coalitions, and embedded routines. Formal training programmes often espouse official organizational values (integrity, customer service, teamwork), while material conditions, such as performance metrics, resource allocation patterns, and career advancement criteria simultaneously teach newcomers the enacted values necessary for survival. This gap between formal and informal socialization is itself a normalization mechanism: newcomers learn that the espoused values are ceremonial while the operative values are those rewarded by the system (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The training process thus functions as what Ashforth and Anand (2003) describe as socialization into deviance, where newcomers are gradually inducted into toxic practices through a combination of official rhetoric and material incentives that overwhelm the nominal values the training purports to instil.

Proposition 5. *(Self-Perpetuation). Normalized toxic culture actively reconstructs the systemic pressures that enabled its emergence through three reinforcing pathways: (a) institutionalizing policies, structures, and reward systems that intensify the four systemic pressures; (b) shaping hiring, promotion, and attrition processes to select for compatibility with toxic norms and filter out those who would challenge them; and (c) creating path-dependent constraints where early normalization progressively narrows the range of viable reform options, making reversal increasingly difficult over time.*

Together, these pathways explain why interventions such as leadership replacement, policy reform, or ethics training so often prove insufficient: the normalized culture continuously reconstructs the conditions that sustain it, rendering surface-level changes ineffective against deep structural reproduction.

Process contingency by Cascade stage

The cascade's dynamics are contingent on its stage of maturation. In early stages, when pressures are first emerging and psychological mechanisms are being activated, the process is highly contingent: countervailing forces, such as ethical leadership, institutional safeguards, or external regulatory attention can interrupt the cascade before normalization takes hold. During middle stages, when psychological mechanisms are co-evolving and toxic norms are spreading through social contagion, the cascade becomes increasingly stable but remains reversible through major intervention such as leadership change

coupled with structural reform. In late stages, once reproduction loops are established, the cascade becomes highly resistant to disruption, and reversal requires simultaneous intervention across multiple organizational levels. The framework thus predicts that the window for low-cost intervention narrows as the cascade matures, lending urgency to early detection and preventive action.

Proposition 6. (*Cascade Resilience*). *The complete toxicity normalization cascade generates self-reinforcing trajectories that become increasingly resistant to disruption over time, such that interventions targeting individual mechanisms or single organizational levels are insufficient to reverse normalization once reproduction loops are established. Effective reversal requires simultaneous intervention across multiple organizational levels, disrupting reproduction pathways while addressing the systemic pressures that continuously regenerate normalization.*

This proposition makes the framework's strongest and most consequential claim: that the cascade, once mature, constitutes a self-perpetuating system requiring systemic rather than piecemeal intervention. The proposition is also the framework's most falsifiable claim. It would be challenged by evidence that single-mechanism interventions (such as leadership replacement alone or ethics training alone) prove sufficient to reverse established normalization, or by cases where all four systemic pressures operate at high intensity yet no normalization occurs. The proposition has direct practical implications: it predicts that organizations seeking to reverse normalized toxicity must address all four contextual dimensions simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

We now turn from framework development to its implications, beginning with an illustrative application that demonstrates how the cascade operates in a well-documented organizational setting.

Illustrative application: The Wells Fargo cross-selling scandal

The Wells Fargo cross-selling scandal provides a particularly instructive illustration of the complete cascade, from initial pressure activation through psychological adaptation to cultural normalization and self-perpetuating reproduction. Between 2011 and 2016, approximately 5,300 employees across thousands of branches systematically opened millions of unauthorized customer accounts, transforming fraud from isolated desperate measures into standard operating procedure (Independent Directors, 2017). The case warrants detailed attention because it represents ordinary organizational transformation rather than aberrant criminality in a respected century-old institution; it is exceptionally well-documented through internal investigation, Congressional analysis, regulatory findings, and academic scholarship (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2016; Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2020; Independent Directors, 2017; Tayan, 2019), and it exhibits the complete cascade from initial pressures through stubborn persistence.

The cascade began with the simultaneous activation of all four systemic pressures. Environmental uncertainty arose from competing institutional logics: the bank publicly championed customer-centric relationship banking while internally driving aggressive cross-selling epitomized by the mandate that every customer needs eight products (Tayan, 2019). Power asymmetry was extreme, with branch managers wielding near-absolute discretion over schedules, evaluations, and employment security, transforming ethical dissent into career suicide through structural dependency rather than overt threats (Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, 2016). Temporal compression operated through daily quotas, real-time performance dashboards, and end-of-day accountability huddles that left no room for genuine customer consultation or ethical pause (Tayan, 2019). Social density was intensified through public performance tracking, team huddles, and leader boards that made

abstaining from aggressive cross-selling a conspicuous deviation inviting both peer scrutiny and managerial sanction (Independent Directors, 2017).

These pressures activated each psychological mechanism in a pattern consistent with the modal pathway. Cognitive simplification emerged as employees reduced customer interactions to a single question: how many accounts can I open? Moral rationalization followed as employees reframed fraudulent accounts as 'solutions' and 'convenience accounts', casting harm as help (Independent Directors, 2017). Displacement of responsibility was pervasive: 'Management told us these were the expectations' (Tayan, 2019). Identity alignment deepened as recognition and reward systems redefined professional worth around sales numbers, leading employees to embrace identities as 'relationship builders' for whom questioning the system meant rejecting one's core professional identity (Tayan, 2019). Behavioural entrenchment completed the cascade as employees developed standardized shortcuts for processing fraudulent transactions until the actions required no more conscious attention than breathing (CRS, 2020).

The cascade's most revealing feature is the reproduction mechanism visible in Wells Fargo's post-scandal trajectory. Even after CEO resignation, Congressional hearings, billions in fines, and announced reforms, the underlying culture proved remarkably resistant to change (Independent Directors, 2017). The normalized culture actively reconstructed the pressures that had enabled its emergence. Most visibly, the culture of top-down control reproduced power asymmetry by continuing to promote managers who embodied aggressive sales approaches into positions where they designed the next generation of performance systems. The culture of relentless sales focus reproduced temporal compression by maintaining structures rewarding speed and volume, ensuring that even reformed policies operated within unchanged temporal rhythms. New metrics, meanwhile, proliferated to replace old ones, reproducing environmental uncertainty in different form (Tayan, 2019). The system, in effect, reconstituted itself faster than reformers could dismantle it (Independent Directors, 2017; Tayan, 2019).

Generalizability: Comparative patterns across organizational contexts

To establish the framework's broader applicability beyond Wells Fargo's financial services context, we briefly examine two contrasting cases organized around a specific analytical question: through which cascade entry points do different organizational contexts become vulnerable to normalization?

Theranos entered the cascade primarily through environmental uncertainty and power asymmetry. The healthcare technology startup operated in a nascent industry lacking established benchmarks, generating profound ambiguity about technological feasibility that activated cognitive simplification as employees reduced complex scientific validity questions to simpler narratives about founder vision (Carreyrou, 2018). Power asymmetry operated through what Tourish and Willmott (2023) characterize as despotic leadership combined with ideological manipulation: Holmes exercised near-absolute control over information flow and organizational decision-making. The case reveals how normalization exploits moral purpose itself: conviction that one's work serves humanity became the psychological mechanism enabling systematic deception when organizational conditions activated the cascade.

Boeing's 737 MAX crisis, by contrast, entered the cascade primarily through temporal compression and the erosion of professional identity. Boeing's 1997 merger with McDonnell Douglas initiated a cultural shift creating environmental uncertainty as engineers faced contradictory signals about whether safety or schedule adherence defined professional competence (Robison, 2021). Temporal compression intensified as compressed development timelines systematically eliminated reflection periods traditionally embedded in aerospace engineering (Gelles et al., 2019; Herkert et al., 2020). Identity alignment proved particularly consequential as Boeing's historically prestigious engineering identity became progressively redefined around financial performance, making resistance to cost-cutting feel like failure to adapt (Larcker & Tayan, 2024; Robison, 2021). The decades-long timeline illustrates how behavioural entrenchment operates at organizational scales, gradually institutionalizing practices that would have been unthinkable under Boeing's original engineering-focused culture.

These differential entry points are analytically significant. Wells Fargo's normalization was driven by all four pressures simultaneously, producing rapid cascade maturation. Theranos exploited moral purpose and charismatic authority in the absence of institutional constraints. Boeing's normalization unfolded over decades through the gradual subordination of professional identity to financial metrics. Yet, all three followed the same underlying cascade logic, with context-specific pressures activating adaptive psychological mechanisms that co-evolved through social interaction, crystallized into normalized culture, and reproduced enabling conditions through feedback loops. The framework thus provides analytical leverage for understanding how organizational pathology emerges and persists across diverse institutional environments.

Theoretical contributions

The TNC framework advances understanding of workplace toxicity in three specific ways, each building on and extending the foundational literatures from which the framework is constructed.

First, TNC provides a specified multilevel causal pathway linking organizational context to normalized toxic culture. While prior scholarship has established that normalization is an organizational accomplishment (Vaughan, 1996) and identified the pillars sustaining it (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), no existing framework traces the complete pathway from specific contextual dimensions through the systemic pressures they generate, through the psychological mechanisms those pressures activate, to the collective culture that emerges from aggregated individual adaptation. By specifying this pathway and articulating primary generative relationships (Proposition 2), TNC moves the study of normalization from retrospective explanation to predictive analysis: rather than identifying normalization after it has occurred, the framework enables identification of which organizational configurations create the greatest vulnerability before normalization takes hold.

Second, the framework formalizes the reproduction mechanism as a fourth mechanism type extending Coleman's (1990) multilevel schema. The observation that normalized cultures tend towards self-perpetuation is not new; Ashforth and Anand (2003) recognized the self-perpetuating tendency of their three pillars, and structuration theory posits the recursiveness of structure and agency in general terms. What has been missing is the specification. Recognizing that toxic cultures reproduce themselves is quite different from explaining how they do so. TNC's contribution is specifying the concrete pathways (Proposition 5) through which self-perpetuation operates in the domain of toxicity normalization, transforming a descriptive observation about persistence into an analytically tractable process.

Third, TNC reframes the central explanandum from emergence to persistence. The question 'How does toxicity become normalized?' has received substantial scholarly attention. The more consequential question for both theory and practice is 'Why does normalized toxicity endure through awareness, leadership change, and reform?' By placing persistence rather than emergence at the centre of analysis, TNC addresses what practitioners and scholars have identified as the most intractable dimension of organizational toxicity (Sull et al., 2022).

Research agenda

Testing the TNC requires a sophisticated, sequenced research agenda. We outline the primary empirical programme and note directions for subsequent inquiry.

Qualitative grounding

The framework's distinctive empirical challenge lies in capturing normalization as it unfolds rather than reconstructing it retrospectively. Comparative, longitudinal case study methodology is ideally suited for

this purpose, as it enables real-time observation of the cascade's multilevel dynamics in natural settings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This phase focuses on generating testable propositions in three key areas, each tied to specific framework claims.

First, propositions of sequence test the modal pathway specified in Proposition 3: does cognitive simplification under environmental uncertainty consistently precede moral rationalization? Does identity alignment typically follow rather than precede moral rationalization? Tracing these sequences requires longitudinal data capturing the temporal ordering of psychological mechanisms as they emerge, evidence that cross-sectional designs cannot provide.

Second, propositions of contextual salience test Proposition 2's claim about primary generative relationships: which systemic pressures prove most potent in specific empirical settings? Comparative case analysis across high power distance and low power distance cultures might reveal whether power asymmetry's influence on identity alignment is culturally moderated, providing crucial guidance for context-sensitive interventions.

Third, propositions of moderation identify endogenous cascade breakers or accelerators. Case data might reveal whether ethical leadership moderates the link between power asymmetry and moral rationalization, or whether open communication structures disrupt the social contagion processes central to action-formation mechanisms, directly informing the stage-contingent intervention logic.

Future methodological directions

Beyond qualitative grounding, the TNC's emergent dynamics and feedback structures invite computational approaches. Agent-based and generative agent simulations could formally test whether the cascade dynamics specified in Propositions 3 and 4 emerge spontaneously from modelled pressure configurations or require additional explanatory factors. System dynamics modelling could map the feedback structure making toxic systems resilient, testing Propositions 5 and 6 by simulating the effects of different intervention strategies on cascade trajectories.

Limitations and boundary conditions

The framework's purely conceptual nature represents a primary limitation. Our objective was building a robust process theory, but we offer no empirical data validating it. This is a necessary first step, as coherent theory is required to guide meaningful empirical inquiry, but the framework remains logically connected propositions rather than empirically tested facts. A second limitation relates to model complexity. In seeking to capture normalization's reality, we sacrificed parsimony for comprehensiveness. This is a genuine trade-off, not a costless one. While we argue this complexity is necessary to model the phenomenon with fidelity, it presents operationalization challenges. The [Supplementary Materials](#) address this by providing detailed measurement approaches, observable indicators, and research designs making the framework's complexity empirically tractable.

Several boundary conditions likely shape the TNC's framework applicability and manifestation. First, the cascade may be most potent in specific organizational forms. We expect the TNC to be particularly pronounced in high-velocity environments such as technology startups, consulting firms, and emergency response teams, where the four systemic pressures are often endemic work features. Conversely, in highly bureaucratized, stable, or public-sector organizations governed by rigid rules and procedures, cascade mechanisms might be buffered, or normalization may follow a slower, more procedural path warranting theoretical extension.

Second, national culture likely represents a critical boundary condition (Hofstede, 2001). Power asymmetry's influence may be amplified in cultures with high power distance, where hierarchical authority is more readily accepted and questioning superiors is culturally discouraged. The identity alignment mechanism might prove more powerful in collectivistic cultures compared with individualistic

ones, as collective identity fusion occurs more readily when cultural norms already emphasize group harmony over individual expression. Environmental uncertainty's effects may vary across cultures differing in uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001), with high uncertainty avoidance cultures potentially experiencing greater cognitive strain under ambiguous conditions. These cultural moderators represent important avenues for future research testing the framework's cross-cultural generalizability.

Finally, our theory explains the process of normalization, not its inevitability. The cascade is always contingent on the absence of countervailing forces. Strong ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005), robust institutional protections for whistle blowers (Near & Miceli, 1995), or the presence of active labour unions may serve as powerful cascade breakers disrupting the feedback loops our model describes. Understanding which organizational features most effectively interrupt normalization cascades represents a critical direction for future research with direct practical implications.

Several conditions would empirically challenge the framework's core claims. First, if organizations experiencing all four systemic pressures at high intensity consistently showed no normalization of toxic practices, this would suggest that the pressure mechanism pathway is insufficient and that additional factors beyond the framework's scope are necessary conditions for normalization. Second, if normalized toxic cultures persisted unchanged even after the complete elimination of all four systemic pressures (for example, through radical organizational redesign), this would challenge the reproduction mechanism's claim that normalized culture sustains itself by reconstructing specific pressures, suggesting instead that normalization, once established, operates through mechanisms entirely independent of the pressures that initiated it. Third, if single-mechanism interventions consistently proved sufficient to reverse established normalization, this would challenge Proposition 6's claim that mature cascades require simultaneous multilevel intervention. Each of these empirical patterns would require significant revision of the framework's architecture.

The framework is also bounded by several scope conditions. TNC is most applicable to organizations characterized by sustained, systemic toxicity rather than isolated incidents of individual misconduct. A single toxic leader whose removal eliminates toxic behaviour suggests individual-level causation rather than the systemic cascade dynamics TNC theorizes. Similarly, organizations with robust institutional safeguards (strong governance structures, effective whistle blower protections, active labour union representation, genuine regulatory oversight) may interrupt the cascade at early stages, preventing the establishment of reproduction loops. Finally, the framework's current formulation draws primarily on examples from Western, market-oriented organizations. Whether the specific pressures and mechanisms identified operate equivalently in organizations embedded in different cultural, economic, or political systems represents an important boundary condition warranting future empirical investigation.

Practical implications: A framework for organizational intervention

The TNC framework's value ultimately lies in its ability to inform organizational intervention. It demands strategic reorientation from reactive, person-centric focus on 'bad apples' to proactive, system-centric cultivation of a 'healthy barrel'. This shift requires leaders to move beyond addressing individual behaviours and instead reshape underlying contextual forces making toxicity possible.

The four systemic pressures provide a diagnostic tool for assessing organizational vulnerability to normalization. Leaders should ask fundamental questions about systems they oversee: Do employees face contradictory signals about what constitutes competent performance, such that the criteria for success remain genuinely ambiguous (environmental uncertainty)? Are there meaningful checks on executive power, or does dissent carry prohibitive costs (power asymmetry)? Is crucial information tightly controlled by those in authority, creating structural dependency through information deprivation (power asymmetry)? Is the organization in a perpetual firefighting state, or is there proactively guarded slack (temporal compression)? Is conformity prized over constructive deviance (social density)? Honest appraisal of these questions reveals organizational context's deep structure, illuminating which pressures most likely fuel the cascade's psychological mechanisms.

The framework thus demands systemic intervention approaches recognizing that sustainable change requires restructuring the deep architecture generating and reproducing toxicity. By understanding how ordinary organizational pressures activate adaptive psychological mechanisms that cascade into normalized dysfunction, leaders gain tools not merely for responding to toxicity after it emerges but for designing organizations resistant to normalization processes from the outset.

CONCLUSION

Workplace toxicity remains one of the most significant drivers of employee disengagement and turnover, imposing enormous costs on individuals and organizations alike (Sull et al., 2022). Yet, a deep theoretical understanding of how such toxicity becomes durably embedded in organizational life has remained elusive. The toxicity normalization cascade addresses this gap by specifying the multilevel process through which organizational conditions generate psychological adaptation, adaptation aggregates into normalized culture, and culture reproduces its enabling conditions. The framework's central insight is that the persistence of toxic cultures is not a puzzle separate from their emergence. The same organizational dynamics that produce normalization also sustain it, through the reproduction mechanism that continuously regenerates the pressures from which it arose. This means that toxic cultures are not aberrations that somehow survive despite organizational design. They are, in a precise sense, products of it—not because anyone intended toxicity, but because the ordinary dynamics of organizational life can generate and sustain it. Building healthier organizations therefore requires more than good intentions or the removal of conspicuously harmful individuals. It demands a systemic commitment to redesigning the contexts that shape human behaviour at work, underscoring the urgency of systemic rather than symbolic intervention.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Aybike Mergen: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Mustafa Özbilgin:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Milena Tekeste:** Writing – review and editing.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Data S1:

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