

Chapter 36

Toxic Workplace Environment and Its Impact on Women Professors in the United States: The Imperative Need for Therapeutic Jurisprudence Practices in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education, often referred to as the ivory tower, gives the grand illusion of an environment of learned individuals with intellectual agendas and pursuits. This specialized environment is not a resistance-free fortress immune from toxic behaviors and unfair internalized institutional structures. In this chapter, the authors provide some theoretical perspectives of a toxic workplace environment. Then the authors focus on a review of literature on toxic leadership; the conceptualization of workplace bullying; the prevalence of academic mobbing; and the effects of toxicity on women professors in the academy. The final sections of the chapter include a discussion of implications for policy development in a toxic workplace; implications for research on toxic university environment; and concluding remarks.

INTRODUCTION

A toxic work environment is an unhealthy work environment. The dynamics of hostile attitudinal behaviors are being manifested in the workplace on a regular basis and in extremely intrusive manners. Toxic behaviors often create a hostile work environment that easily escalates into harassment, stress,

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verbal aggression, discrimination, unrealistic expectations, emotional abuse, bullying, intimidation, personal insults, incivility, and other types of counterproductive negative actions (Sutton, 2007). When a workplace allows misconduct to exist, inevitably, destructive emotional and mental repercussions will develop. When this type of environment continues to exist, Namie and Namie (2009) and Einarsen, et al. (2003) describe this as an epidemic of bullying in the contemporary workplace.

BACKGROUND

Structural determinants of toxicity in higher education will be explored. Demoralizing, dehumanizing, devaluing, bullying and uncivil behaviors are used to describe the processes by which systematic organizational structures within the academy are sanctioned and allowed to perpetuate toxic or hostile workplace environments. The undeniable contribution of women professors in this field, the undermining of their role as instructional and administrative leaders, and the overall lack of research on this aspect of academia indicates further investigative exploration on the topic of women in academia and the impact of a toxic workplace environment on their job performance and morale.

The authors propose establishing a foundational understanding of what factors contribute to an environment becoming toxic and how this toxic workplace environment impacts women professors in the academy. As research studies cited in this chapter indicate higher education or, as many would like to call it, the “ivory tower”, is not immune from but mirrors the corrosive, decisive, and damaging impact these negative behaviors have on the lives of targeted individuals.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF A TOXIC WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

During the course of our lives, no environment, in which we exist, claims as many of our waking hours as the workplace. For instance, if we assume that a typical individual works 40 hours per week or approximately 2080 hours per year for 40 years, the total number of hours worked would be 83,200. Consequently, many of our waking hours are spent at work. Since many hours are spent in the workplace with many individuals, the numbers of human interactions are multiple and constantly changing. In other words, there are constant opportunities for toxicity to occur among and between individuals. How can this phenomenon be better understood and explained? What factors contribute to individuals working together in positive and constructive ways? What factors contribute to individuals developing a very toxic and hostile relationship in the workplace? What factors contribute to individuals basically taking a neutral position in their relationship with their colleagues in the workplace?

Many theoretical perspectives have been offered for several years to help us understand this psychosocial behavior in the workplace environment. Perspectives by Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959), McGregor (1960), Bandura (2002), Zimbardo (2004), Koehn (2007), Madan (2014), and Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino Ivancevich, and Konopaske (2012) are discussed to provide various possible explanations of this phenomenon. In the mid-20th century, Herzberg and his colleagues attempted to describe the relationship between job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). The two part theory included hygiene factors and motivation factors. The hygiene factors were found to be those that were external to workers and expected by the worker, such as organizational policy, salary, work conditions, and relationships with subordinates and peers. As a consequence, the absence of these factors was found

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