



Toxic Work Culture and Power Imbalance: A Qualitative Psychosocial Study In the Contact Center Industry

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Abstract. Toxic work culture has become a major concern in organizational psychology due to its impact on mental health and productivity. This study explores how power imbalances, weak organizational systems, and the absence of protective mechanisms create psychosocial stress in the workplace. Using a qualitative case study in the Contact Center Industry in Central Java and Yogyakarta, 10 participants from various job levels were interviewed through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic coding. Findings revealed three dominant themes: psychological insecurity (63%), reflected in withdrawal, fear of speaking up, and loss of initiative; toxic behaviors (18%), such as sarcasm and verbal abuse tolerated due to high performance; and structural dysfunction (23%), including the absence of conflict SOPs and weak HR intervention. Employees responded with self-protection strategies like social withdrawal. This study contributes to developing ethical and psychologically safe organizational systems through ethics-based evaluation and stronger HR functions.

Keywords: *toxic culture; power imbalance; psychosocial stress; human resources dysfunction; employee resilience*

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Introduction

Work culture within an organization plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and collective team performance (Nurhalim, [2022](#)). A healthy work culture encourages productivity, collaboration, and the psychological well-being of employees (Takahashi, [2021](#)). However, when negative behaviors are allowed to recur without systemic intervention, a condition known as a toxic workplace emerges (Pimenta, [2022](#)). This phenomenon generally stems from unequal power relations, weak organizational systems, and the absence of protective mechanisms, which ultimately lead to long-term psychosocial stress (Coldwell, [2021](#); Barsade, [2020](#)).

Although the issue of toxic workplaces is gaining attention, most previous studies have focused on the direct psychological impact on individuals, such as stress, job dissatisfaction, or intention to leave the job (Altindag, [2023](#); Liu, [2020](#)). There has been little research integrating the interrelationships between power imbalances, organizational structural dysfunction, and employees' psychosocial coping strategies within a single analytical framework. This gap is particularly relevant in the service sector, where strict performance targets and rigid hierarchical structures increase the risk of employee stress and burnout (Hidayat, [2020](#); Rizani, [2022](#)).

National data reinforces the urgency of this research. A report by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, [2022](#)) shows that more than 30% of complaints of non-physical violence in the workplace are related to verbal shaming, exclusion, and emotional manipulation—key indicators of a toxic work culture. The Ministry of Manpower (Kemanaker, [2021](#)) also reports that 49% of service sector workers experience emotional distress or interpersonal conflicts that are not addressed by management. Additionally, an (ILO, [2021](#)) found that 22% of Indonesian workers admit to not having a safe reporting channel for cases of psychological harassment in the workplace. These conditions reflect the weakness of structural systems in handling relational conflicts.

In this context, the contact center industry is one of the sectors most vulnerable to the development of a toxic work culture. This sector is known for its high employee turnover, strict target systems, and frequent reports of psychological pressure (Grawitch, [2018](#); Jonker, [2025](#)). When power relations are not balanced with a safe reporting system, active HR functions, and adequate conflict management SOPs, deviant behavior tends to be normalized and tolerated (Malik, & Sattar, [2022](#)). As a result, long-term effects emerge in the form of a culture of silence, declining solidarity, and sudden resignations (Kiptulon, [2024](#)).

A number of studies reinforce this picture. Ramadhan (2025) shows that a culture of mutual blame due to structural pressure reduces team solidarity in the manufacturing sector. Monton (2025) finds that unhealthy dynamics also arise in the world of elite sports due to collective tolerance of unethical behavior. Chen, S., & Liu (2021) add that tense internal communication encourages the creation of organizational silence, especially among new employees. Hidayat (2020) highlights the lack of an active role for HR in handling interpersonal conflicts, which actually exacerbates employees' emotional stress. Moha (2023) even asserts that toxic leadership not only damages interpersonal relationships but also damages the organization's image in the public eye.

These findings indicate that toxic culture within organizations cannot be separated from the structural context and unequal power relations. In the long term, tolerance of toxic individuals because they are considered 'high achievers' actually reinforces a dysfunctional work culture. An evaluation system that is overly results-oriented without considering ethics and social processes further exacerbates the situation (Rizani, 2022; Pimenta, 2022). This highlights the importance of building an organizational system that balances performance achievement with relational ethics.

This study aims to fill the existing gap by examining how toxic work culture in the contact center industry is formed through power imbalances, organizational structural weaknesses, and employees' psychosocial coping strategies. Through a qualitative approach, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to organizational psychology studies while offering practical recommendations for improving ethical, fair, and psychologically safe work systems. Additionally, this study also seeks to present a comprehensive framework for understanding the interaction between behavioral, structural, and emotional factors in the formation of toxic work culture, particularly in high-pressure service sectors such as the Contact Center industry.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design, to explore in depth the experiences of employees towards the dynamics of a toxic work culture. This approach is used to understand how unequal power relations and weak organizational systems create psychosocial stress in the world of work. In-depth interviews were the main method of data collection, organized according to the *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research* (COREQ) guidelines to ensure transparency and quality of the research process (Tong et al., 2007). Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with guidelines developed to explore participants' personal experiences. Some of the questions included: "What is your experience with interpersonal conflict in the workplace?" and "How

would you rate the organization's response to toxic behavior in the workplace?". The questions were structured to be flexible so that they could be adapted to the narrative and context of each participant's experience.

Participants were selected using *purposive sampling* method, with the following criteria: (a) actively working for at least 6 months in the same *contact center* company, (b) having experience facing interpersonal conflict or social pressure at work, and (c) willing to provide information openly. A total of 10 participants were involved, consisting of 8 employees and 2 supervisors from various levels of positions, all of whom live in the Central Java and DIY regions. The selection was made based on the suitability of the experiential context to the research focus, location efficiency, and ethical feasibility. Participation was voluntary and no financial incentives were provided. All participants were provided with a research information sheet, and gave informed consent before the demographic data and interview process began. To protect identities, all names in the article are pseudonymized. The demographic data of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Demographic data of participants

Pseudonym	Position	Length of Service	Location
A	Junior Employee	6 Months	DIY
B	Supervisor 1	2 Years	Central Java
C	Former Employee	2 Weeks	DIY
D	Senior Employee	4 Years	Central Java
E	Team Leader	3 Years	DIY
F	Support Employee	1.5 Years	DIY
G	Medium Employee	2 Years	Central Java
H	Senior Agent	5 Years	DIY
I	HRD	2 Years	Central Java

All authors except the fourth author are lecturers at a university in Malang. The first, second and third authors were master's students studying at a university in Malang, trained in qualitative methodology by the fourth author and took part in the research as data analysts. The fourth author is qualified in social psychology with extensive experience in qualitative studies and took part in data processing.

The analysis was done thematically inductively following the (Miles et al., 2014) approach which includes the stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. The process began with *in vivo coding* to identify meaningful quotes from the interview transcripts. Next, grouping was done based on similarity of meaning (*open coding*), followed by the development of categories and relationships between themes (*axial coding*), until the main themes and subthemes were formed (*selective coding*). After that, the data was analyzed

reflectively-descriptively using emic interpretation based on participants' narratives. Validity was maintained through source triangulation, member checking, and discussion between researchers to ensure consistency of interpretation. Thus, the findings reflect the participants' subjective experiences authentically while still being organized in a credible scientific framework.

Results

This study reveals the psychosocial dynamics of individuals in dealing with the pressures of a toxic work environment. Emotional responses, adaptive-maladaptive behaviors, and patterns of social relations are the main indicators in understanding the barriers to social functioning experienced by participants. Psychological insecurity, unequal power relations, and organizational system weaknesses exacerbate the situation. Through the process of *open coding*, *selective coding*, and *axial coding*, main themes and subthemes were found that describe coping strategies, forms of toxic behavior, and hopes for improvement of the work system. Each finding is presented based on the identification of keywords, subcategories, and themes, to describe the specific experiences of participants. Details of the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Data Tabulation of Inequality of Power Relations and Hope for Recovery in an Unhealthy Work Culture

Category	F	%	Subtheme	F	%	Theme
Protection Strategies Social & Emotional Protection in the Workplace	10	8%	Psychological Insecurity as an Impact of Toxic Work Culture	77	63%	Unequal Power Relationships and Expectations of Recovery in an Unhealthy Work Culture
Insecurity Psychological Insecurity in the Workplace	29	24%				
Problematic Behavior and Toxicity	22	18%				
Team Dysfunction and Social Relationships	16	13%				
Systemic Weakness Organization	18	15%	Structural Dysfunction in Organizational Problem Handling	28	23%	
Ineffectiveness HR Interventions and Functions	10	8%				
Expectations and Recommendations for System Improvement	18	15%	Aspiration for Change Toward a Healthy and Equitable Work Environment	18	15%	

Thematic analysis showed that the dominant theme was Inequality of Power Relations and Expectations of Recovery in Unhealthy Work Culture (123; 38%), followed by Psychological

Insecurity due to Toxic Work Culture (77; 24%), and Organizational Structural Dysfunction (28; 9%). Subthemes included social-emotional protection strategies (9%), weak organizational systems (16%), and aspirations to improve the work environment (15%). Other important categories include tolerance of toxic actors due to performance (4%), team dysfunction (14%), and ineffectiveness of HR functions (9%). Subcategories such as social coping strategies, verbal abuse, and sudden resignation reinforce the picture of a stressful work ecosystem. The findings confirm that power imbalances, weak support systems and toxic cultures have a major impact on employees' psychosocial health.

Psychological Insecurity as an Impact of Toxic Work Culture

Based on the coding results, it was found that there are 10 symptom indications that lead to social & emotional protection strategies at work. This research shows that in a psychologically insecure work culture situation, employees tend to build a social & emotional protection strategy at work. social and emotional coping strategies to protect themselves from stress. These strategies include avoidance of interactions (41C-E), restricting associations to a small, safe circle (74A-H), and caution when socializing with colleagues (61D-G). Subtle forms of shunning such as not being invited to meals or cold replies to messages were common (63B-G). Coping mechanisms also emerged in the form of personal activities such as meditation or journal writing to maintain emotional stability (79A-H). One strategy that was also suggested among employees was to first recognize the work culture before opening up emotionally (28B-C). This indicates that self-protection is a priority in a work environment that is perceived to be full of risks. As indicated by one participant H:

"I only talk to friends outside the team, sometimes I also write in my journal. I can't get too close, I'll get insinuated or suspected of being too familiar." (H-79)-26 years old

Furthermore, there are 29 symptom indications that describe psychological insecurity in the workplace. The findings suggest that the change in work culture from warm to rigid and closed pushed employees into survival mode. Insecurity appears in the form of cold communication, a tense work atmosphere, and decreased solidarity between employees. Many individuals choose to be passive, no longer show initiative or provide ideas, and only work as an obligation. Dominant figures who are often sarcastic or verbally oppressive also reinforce the insecure atmosphere, making employees reluctant to speak up and prefer to withdraw from social interactions. This lowers intrinsic motivation and reinforces the tendency to work without emotional engagement. The fear of speaking up, including the fear of being misunderstood or satirized, is one indicator

that the work environment has lost its sense of psychological safety. As expressed by one participant F:

"Now it's safer to stay quiet, do my work, and then go home. Just saying a few words can be insinuated. I've become passive. I used to be proactive in giving ideas, now I just wait for instructions. It's safer to be quiet than to stand out. After that, many people became silent, passive, and only work for a paycheck." (F-64)-28 years old

Then, 22 symptoms were found that reflect problematic behavior and toxicity in the work environment. Behavior patterns that lead to toxicity include open sarcasm (2-A), verbal abuse, and manipulation by senior figures to other colleagues, especially those considered more junior (67-G). These forms of psychological abuse are done openly, such as insinuating in work groups or briefing forums, without any intervention from supervisors or HR (32). Intervention from superiors or HR (32-D). This condition is exacerbated by the absence of formal sanctions against the perpetrators, in fact, the perpetrators often receive protection because their performance is considered high (36-D). Work evaluations that only focus on achieving numbers and results make unethical behavior normalized (78-H). This creates an unhealthy work culture, where employees prefer to remain silent and defensive to protect themselves. Participant A revealed:

"The culprit does perform well, but he often really sarcastic and demeaning in front of people. But the boss just keeps quiet." (A-45)-31 years old.

After that, there are 16 symptoms that describe the dysfunction of teams and social relations. In this context, teams that previously had a collaborative work culture began to shift to individualistic and fragmented work patterns (35-D). Cohesiveness weakened, communication became limited, and mutual trust dwindled (6-A & 35-D). Many team members felt uncomfortable, some even decided to resign abruptly without saying goodbye (37-D), while others stayed on due to family responsibilities or workload (38D). Employees also expressed embarrassment and fear of coming forward due to experiences of public shaming or coldness from coworkers (3- A & 33-D). This disharmony contributed to the desire to leave and created an environment of emotional distress. Participant A said:

"The team used to be really solid, working together and helping each other. Now? There's no one trust each other, each goes their own way." (A-6)-29 years old

Structural Dysfunction in Organizational Problem Handling

The research findings show that structural dysfunction in handling organizational problems occurs due to systemic organizational weaknesses. There are 18 symptoms that illustrate this. The absence of clear SOPs and lack of structural support are the main obstacles in dealing with toxic behavior and inter-individual conflicts in the workplace. HR and supervisors

are often in a dilemma, asked to mediate, but not provided with authority, technical guidance, or clear lines of authority. As a result, interventions stop midway, without a complete solution. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of managerial support for corrective action. This weak handling structure directly contributes to increased turnover, decreased loyalty, and deteriorating organizational service quality. This condition shows how weak the structural foundation is in maintaining work balance and organizational justice. Where participant C said:

"HR was asked to facilitate, but they didn't have guidance or authorization. In the end, it just stagnated. This is because there is no specific SOP from HR for interpersonal conflict and handling toxic behavior, either written rules or structural support." (C-44)-33 years old

In other findings, it also showed 10 symptoms representing the subtheme "Ineffectiveness of HR Interventions and Functions". HR functions are largely limited to facilitating conversations without clear follow-up or support from management. HR feels awkward on the one hand being the bridge between employees and superiors, but on the other hand not having a strategic role in decision-making. Many HR inputs are ignored, leaving them frustrated and losing initiative. Employees also feel reluctant to report because toxic perpetrators often have strong positions or are considered high achievers. As a result, there is no significant change in work culture. When HR's role is only administrative and passive, there is little room to improve the work climate. As one participant said:

"HR is just a place for complaints, but it can't do anything. It's just recorded, then lost. HR input is often ignored, I feel like it's a waste to report, I'm afraid I'll be the one who gets hit back." (B-17)-30 years old

Aspiration for Change Towards a Healthy Work Environment

Based on the coding results, 18 symptoms were found that reflect aspirations for change towards a healthy work environment. Employees emphasize the importance of building a humane workplace, not just a results-oriented one. Performance evaluations should consider ethics, attitudes towards colleagues, and the social impact of work behavior. When an organization's focus is solely on numbers, employees feel pressured, unappreciated, and at risk of becoming apathetic or even toxic. As such, they demand safe spaces to speak up, as well as protective reporting systems. If these needs continue to be ignored, the once healthy work environment has the potential to turn into an arena for hidden conflict. As participant B stated:

"The workplace is not just about hard work, but also about feeling safe to be yourself. The workplace makes good people cold and apathetic. The toxic culture will continue to take root if not addressed" (B-30)-28 years old

Therefore, employees expressed a strong desire for the organization to have clear ethical and structural systems, including employee protection SOPs, anti-bullying training, and

anonymous and safe reporting lines. They consider that support from top management is crucial to ensure that the intervention process is consistent and does not stagnate in the middle of the road (88-HR). In addition, they expect a neutral space for grievances, supportive mentoring, and a conflict-of-interest-free evaluation system (57-F). All of these are seen as crucial steps to change the work culture to a healthier and more equitable one. Participant A stated:

"If there is no fair system, the toxicity will remain. There should be SOPs, a safe place to complain, and neutral evaluation." (A-88)-31 years old

This research shows that psychological insecurity in the workplace is a direct result of a toxic work culture. Employees respond with self-protective strategies such as distancing and focusing on work without emotional engagement, which reinforces the cycle of closed communication and insecurity. A toxic culture grows because problematic behavior is left unpunished, especially when the perpetrator is considered an achiever. Weak structural systems and the absence of SOPs make HR and superiors ineffective in handling conflict. As a result, team relations deteriorate, loyalty decreases, and turnover increases. Amidst these conditions, employees are voicing hopes for a more humane work environment-with safe spaces, attitude-based evaluation, and a clear ethics system. These aspirations reflect the need for fundamental changes in organizational culture and governance. This requires structural reforms in the form of SOPs, ethics training, anonymous reporting, and a strategic role for management to make the workplace healthy, fair, and sustainable.

Discussion

Unequal power relations and weak organizational structures have been shown to have a significant impact on employees' psychological well-being, as described in this study. The lack of clarity in conflict handling, intimidating communication, and toleration of toxic behavior triggered emotional tension, decreased motivation, and fragmentation in work relationships. The psychological insecurity felt by employees also led to self-protection strategies and a culture of silence that exacerbated the situation. Details are presented in the interpretation scheme of the discussion findings in Figure 1.

Power Relations, Structural Inequality, and Toxic Workplace Culture

The unhealthy work culture in this study appears to arise not only because of problematic individual behavior, but because the organization fails to build a fair and supportive system. When power relations are not balanced by structural responsibilities, and there are no rules that protect employees from social pressure, tensions become part of the work routine (Barsade, [2002](#);

Coldwell, [2021](#)). Under these conditions, initially enthusiastic employees tend to withdraw, become more passive, and lose trust in their colleagues and superiors (Buil et al., [2019](#); Zeesahn et al., [2020](#)). Strategies of silence, limiting interactions, or hiding emotions are not a sign of weakness, but a form of self-protection from a psychologically unsafe environment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, [2000](#)). These findings show that toxic culture works systemically, through repeated breeding and structural indecisiveness.

The defensive responses that emerge from employees are not knee-jerk reactions, but are formed from long-term patterns of adaptation to constant pressure. Many of them develop defensive strategies such as social distancing, avoiding discussion forums, and only building relationships with people they consider emotionally safe (Mopkins, [2022](#); Zotova & Karapetyan, [2018](#)). In organizations that emphasize quantitative achievement and undermine relational ethics, unhealthy competition becomes normal, and verbal innuendo or harassment is often considered part of the work dynamic (Tastan, [2019](#)). Such a situation makes formal reporting channels less trusted, and correction of violations tends to be avoided as futile or even risks backlash (Montano et al., [2023](#)). Thus, organizational structure also determines the extent to which employees can feel safe in speaking out.

The results of this study show that the phenomena observed have intersections with previous findings related to a culture of silence and weak supervisory functions in organizations. However, this research adds an important dimension such as the reluctance to speak out is not just a matter of fear, but because the system does not provide space for action (Sari & Dudija, [2024](#)). HR, which is supposed to be a facilitator of protection, is stuck in a passive position because it does not have enough authority, technical direction, or managerial support (Alsereidi, [2022](#); Manaa, [2022](#)). When structures are unable to sustain change, individual efforts are easily dampened. In this context, research findings confirm that work culture reform cannot be separated from revamping the internal organizational system that is more strategic and in favor of social justice (Chen, S., & Liu, [2021](#)).

However, not all forms of silence or avoidance stem from direct organizational pressures. Prevailing social values in society also play a role in shaping patterns of work interaction that avoid open confrontation. The culture of collectivism and norms of harmony, which are strong in the Indonesian context, often encourage individuals to store up problems in order to maintain stable social relations (De Clercq et al., [2020](#); Katanskij & Kolobaev, [2022](#); Seligman, [1972](#)). On the other hand, economic factors and financial needs make many workers choose to stay in stressful working conditions, as leaving is considered a higher risk (Indradevi, [2022](#); Zeng et al., [2020](#)).

These social and structural contexts reinforce the influence of weak organizational systems, and create a work climate where change becomes increasingly difficult to realize despite growing awareness of the need for change among employees.

Contextual Limitations, Research Ethics and Organizational Implications

The work culture dynamics observed in the context of contact centers may not be fully representative of other organizations that differ in structure and value orientation. Quantitative pressures and rigid vertical relationships provide the setting for toxic cultures to emerge, while in other sectors such as education or social care, more fluid structures may create different responses (Coldwell, [2021](#); van Zoonen et al., [2024](#)). While patterns such as acquiescence to toxic actors or a tendency to silence may also emerge in other sectors, how organizations deal with them will depend on the dominant values and norms within their internal systems (Indradevi, [2022](#); Mopkins, [2022](#)). Therefore, the findings in his study are used as a reflective framework, not a rigid generalization model (Creswell, [2018](#); Katanskij & Kolobaev, [2022](#); Montano et al., [2023](#)).

The process of interaction between the researcher and participants was colored by the need to maintain a sense of security in conversations concerning sensitive issues. Many of the participants were still working within the organizations in question, so their narratives needed protection from possible adverse social risks (Lexy, [2022](#); Mopkins, [2022](#)). To maintain the integrity of the process, researchers applied the principle of confidentiality and avoided details that could reveal identities, as well as ensuring any quotes were confirmed by participants (De Clercq et al., [2020](#)); Muller et al., [2023](#)). Despite these efforts, it is still possible that participants may tell stories that have been compartmentalized in order to maintain their position. This situation emphasizes the importance of relational ethics and social sensitivity in research, especially in the realm of hierarchy and hidden conflict (Moha, [2023](#); Tiwari & Jha, [2022](#)).

The discourse emerging from this research has a number of practical consequences for improving policies and organizational structures. One of the most urgent is the revamping of reporting systems to truly ensure psychological safety and protection from social retaliation, rather than just formal procedures (Montano et al., [2023](#)). In addition, organizations need to embed behavioral and ethics-based evaluations in assessing work performance, not just numbers (Mopkins, [2022](#); TASTAN, [2019](#)). Future research could explore the effectiveness of these reforms through quantitative or mixed-method approaches. Cross-sector studies also need to be developed so that toxic culture prevention strategies can be adapted to diverse work contexts (Hobfoll, [1989](#); Pimenta, [2022](#)). With these steps, the transformation of organizational culture into a more inclusive and humane one is possible.

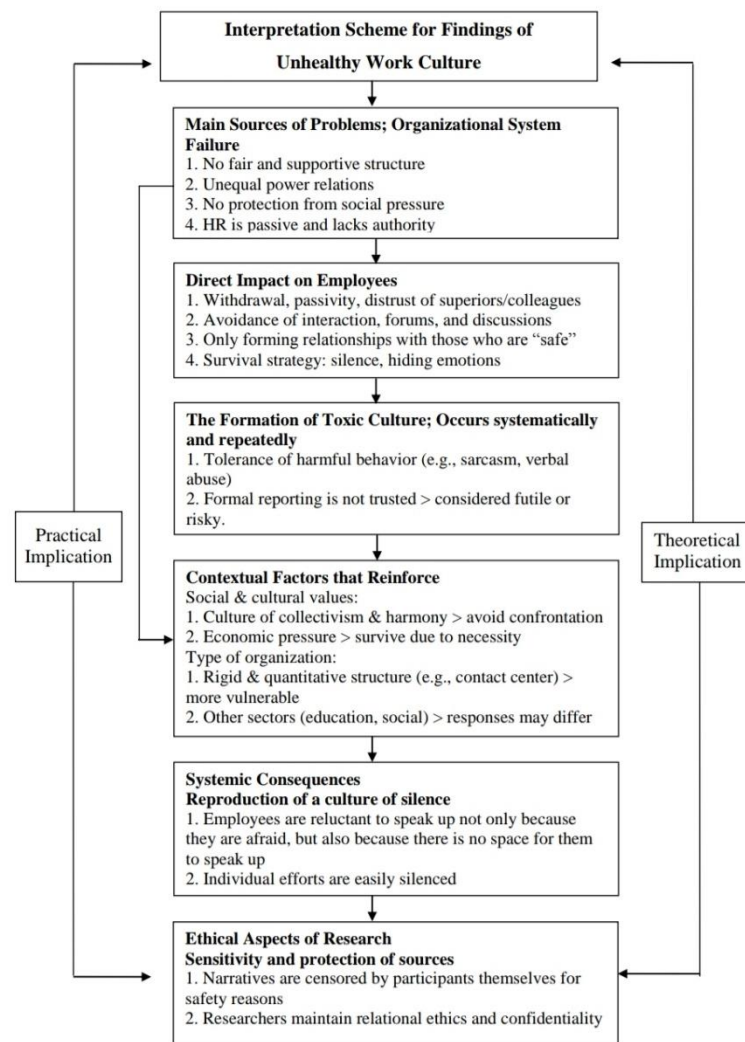


Figure 1. Interpretation Scheme Toxic Work Culture and Employee Psychological Regulation Strategies

Conclusion

This study shows that toxic work culture in the Contact Center industry is not only triggered by individual behavior but reinforced by unequal power relations, weak organizational structures, and the absence of employee protection policies. The main impacts include psychological insecurity, a culture of silence, reduced social interaction, and emotional survival strategies. These dysfunctions are intensified by ineffective HR interventions, lack of conflict SOPs, and tolerance of toxic actors due to high performance. The findings highlight the need for structural and ethical reforms that balance performance demands with employees' psychological well-being. Theoretically, this study contributes to organizational psychology by integrating individual and systemic factors, while practically offering concrete recommendations such as strengthening HR functions, establishing safe reporting systems, developing conflict resolution

SOPs, and implementing ethics-based performance evaluations to create a healthier and fairer workplace.

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