

AVENIR CONSULTING LTD

RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP

Understanding Toxic Power and Corrupt Leaders

North West
Social Science
Doctoral Training
Partnership



Economic
and Social
Research Council

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Project Outline

Understanding Toxic Power and Corrupt Leadership

This research project explores how power becomes toxic within organisational systems (and implications in wider society) and why individuals and institutions enable or follow corrupt leadership. The study aims to uncover the systemic, psychological, and cultural factors that allow legitimate authority to evolve into abuse of power. The project will combine an integrative review of existing scholarship with empirical qualitative research to generate actionable insights for organisations seeking to prevent or dismantle toxic power structures.

Aims and Research Questions

Draft primary research question:

- *What factors lead to toxic power and corrupt leadership within organisations?*

Secondary questions include:

- *What psychological mechanisms make power appealing to those who hold it and to those who follow it?*
- *What can organisations do to dismantle or neutralise toxic power dynamics?*

These will likely evolve once the literature review is complete.

Conceptual and Theoretical Focus

The project is grounded in organisational behaviour, leadership studies, and critical management theory. The study will also engage psychological perspectives on power to explain why individuals and followers are drawn to or tolerate abusive authority.

Placement Timeline and Key Objectives

Phase 1: Literature Review (Full-time: Weeks 1-3, Part-time: Months 1-2)

The first phase will involve a comprehensive synthesis of academic and practitioner sources addressing:

1. **Systemic power in organisations** - structures, hierarchies, and control mechanisms that perpetuate inequity and dependence.

2. **Toxic and corrupt leadership** - behavioural traits, environmental triggers, and organisational cultures that normalise unethical conduct.
3. **Power tactics and followership** - manipulation, coercion, charisma, and psychological attachment to authority.

Output: This phase will identify research gaps and establish a conceptual framework linking structural and psychological dimensions of toxic power.

Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection (Full-time: Weeks 4-7, Part-time: Months 3-4)

A decision on the best qualitative design method will be made based on the output of Phase 1. A likely method is semi-structured interviews with 15-20 participants across a range of organisations. The CEO of Avenir, Nadia Nagamoto, has a pre-existing network of organisations from which the sample can be drawn. Participants will include middle and senior managers, HR professionals, and employees with firsthand experience of toxic leadership (definition of this based on Phase 1 lit review). The student will need to create the interview questions and will be responsible for booking interviews, ensuring consent forms are signed etc., and recording the interviews. Supplementary data (organisational documents, public inquiry reports, or policy statements) can be used for triangulation.

Output: 15-20 transcripts ready for analysis.

Phase 3: Analysis and Synthesis (Full-time: Weeks 8-10, Part-time: Month 5)

Data will be coded and organised into thematic categories (e.g., structural enablers, psychological drivers, follower dynamics, cultural factors). Thematic analysis will include identifying patterns in how power operates, becomes distorted, and is legitimised within organisational systems. This may lead to a conceptual model describing how organisational and psychological factors interact to produce toxic power.

Output: Thematic analysis of all data, extracting patterns and developing a conceptual model.

Phase 4: White Paper (Full-time: Weeks 10-13, Part-time: Month 6)

Write a business report on the research that will be published on the Avenir website and shared on socials. Avenir's CEO will support the student in positioning this report for a business context and ensuring the language is accessible to business leaders. The aim would be to develop practical recommendations for leadership development, governance, and ethical culture interventions. Ideally the student will also produce some practical guidelines for organisations to detect, prevent, and dismantle power abuse.

Output: A White paper which cites the student as co-author.

Required and Desired Skills

This project might appeal more to those in Psychology, Sociology and perhaps Criminology pathways, but broadly the organisation is looking for a student with a curious mind who is interested in systemic power, leadership and organisational culture.

This is a qualitative project, so someone with experience in qual methods is needed.

What skills will be acquired through this placement?

The student will gain experience in developing and carrying out a qualitative research project for a consulting firm. The firm's CEO, Nadia Nagamootoo, intends to use the research as the basis for her next book, which the student will be able to site a contribution to.

Nadia Nagamootoo is a Chartered Business/Occupational Psychologist specialising in diversity, equity and inclusion. If the student is interested in this area or entrepreneurship, then Nadia is open to sharing. She is happy to support the student's interests and development in any way, whether that be shadowing client meetings, attending workshops she is facilitating, or spending time sharing how she runs her business. She also often attends in-person networking events in London on pertinent business topics, which the student could join if the subject is of interest.

Timeframe

This is a 13-week placement that can either be worked part-time ideally over 26 weeks, or full-time over 13 weeks.

Delivery of project

This is a 100% virtual placement. There may be opportunities to shadow Avenir's CEO in London, which will be arranged on an ad hoc basis. But primarily, the student will work remotely.

Induction process and support you will receive

Weekly meetings to touch base and ensure clarity of focus and project goals. The placement holder will work closely with Nadia Nagamootoo, feeding back and having discussions on output and insights from the research.

Ethics Approval

No ethics approval needed.

Equality and Diversity commitments

Avenir Consulting Ltd confirms their alignment with NWSSDTP's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion commitments.

How to apply

To apply for this role, please complete the 'Expression of Interest form' available on the [NWSSDTP website](#), using job title mentioned in the NWSSDTP advertisement.

Once completed and discussed with your supervisor, return the completed form to Amy Connolly (ripss@liverpool.ac.uk).