



Understanding Workplace Gaslighting: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper will discuss an in-depth approach to gaslighting and emotional manipulation in the workplace. We will be exploring the definitions of gaslighting manifestations that affect individuals and organizations, and the solutions for how to prevent this. We will discuss the psychosocial mechanisms of these behaviors to understand what is happening, how someone relates to toxic workplace cultures, and how they affect employee well-being and organizational performance by looking at literature and case studies. This study will make us understand the destructive character and behavior of gaslighting and emotional manipulation in the workplace and give us solutions for coping with it and increasing productivity in the work environment.

Keywords: *Emotional Manipulation; Toxic Leadership; Psychological Safety*

Introduction

Workplace dynamics have long been studied in organizational psychology and management research. However, researchers have recently started to pay more attention to insider forms of interpersonal behavior that can create toxic work environments (Darke, Paterson, & van Golde, 2025). Gaslighting and emotional manipulation are harmful practices that could have significant effects on individuals and organizations (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). Gaslighting, derived from the 1938 stage play *Gas Light* and its film adaptations, is psychological manipulation in which a person or group makes someone question their sanity, memories, perspective, and understanding of reality (Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Darke et al, 2025). In the workplace, this could happen because colleagues or superiors consistently deny or destroy events, shift blame to make the employee doubt their judgment, or minimize their feelings (Hussain, Abbas, Gulzar, Jibril, & Hussain, 2020). Even though emotional manipulation overlaps with gaslighting as a term, it carries a wider spectrum of tactics to use to influence or control another person's emotions for personal gain or advantage. However, gaslighting is a concept that is too vague a concept to separate from similar abuses, such as manipulation, brainwashing, and bullying (Kukreja & Pande, 2023).

Methodology

This paper gives a broad analysis of gaslighting and emotional manipulation from an organizational context. Multiple databases, such as PsycINFO, PubMed, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar, with backward citation searches between December 2024 to March 2025. Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed, examined workplace or organizational settings, and addressed gaslighting directly or studied similar concepts that overlap, such as bullying, abusive supervision, and mobbing. Articles were chosen if they were peer-reviewed, and theoretical papers were only selected if they provided major information. Abstracts of 210 papers were reviewed and scanned. 65 of them were reviewed thoroughly, and 35 were chosen to be good enough to be included in the paper. This review only uses English-language publications, so perspectives from non-English researchers may not be represented to the fullest. Although both face-to-face and digital studies reflect the changing reality of the modern workplace, the field is still developing. Especially, empirical work on digital gas lighting is just starting to get recognized. This makes using the findings limited.

Literature Review

History of Gaslighting

The term gaslighting originated from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gaslight* and its film adaptations in 1940 and 1994, which is a story about a husband who manipulates his wife into questioning her own sanity by dimming the lights slowly over time and denying that the room is getting darker (Klein, Wood, & Bartz, 2025). This play, this term, is culturally significant because the name of the play became a metaphor for psychological manipulation that's done to destroy someone's trust in their own judgment. The first case of this phenomenon being mentioned in an academic discussion was Burton and Whitehead's *Lancet* article, "The Gas-Light Phenomenon" (1969), which talked about how professionals were letting patients who were unstable get them institutionalized (Barton & Whitehead). In the 1970s, Case reports created a wider perspective on this, since documents showed instances where elderly patients in hospitals and care homes were gaslighted by caretakers and staff, showing that gaslighting was not limited to family members (Klein et al., 2025).

In the 1980s, scholars worked on figuring out the psychological mechanisms rather than the institutional aspects. Calef and Weinshel (1981) proposed the idea that gaslighting is a behavior designed to destabilize a victim's self-trust without the victim being aware of this motive. Later, it was shown that gaslighting in marital relationships also exists by identifying patterns in cases where unfaithful husbands try to deflect blame by saying that their wives are irrational (Gass & Nichols, 1988). After that, a wider psychoanalytic perspective describing gaslighting as a hidden way to control a person's emotions by denying emotional reality was created. (Dorpat, 1996).

Gaslighting became a massive mainstream term with Stern's book "The Gaslight Effect" (2008), because it talked about pre-traitor types and showed people that gaslighting works based on the victim's desire for validation. This popularization made it academically more recognized, especially when Merriam-Webster named "gaslighting" the word of the year in 2022 (Klein et al., 2025). Over time, this concept became a phrase to explain manipulation across different settings, such as relationships, workplaces, and institutions.

Table 1 shows the historical significance of gaslighting and what it represented at that time.

Table 1. Gaslighting's History

Date	Contributions	Context
1938–1944	The term <i>Gaslight</i> play and films popularized the term	Husband manipulates wife by dimming lights, which became a cultural metaphor.
1969	First academic description of <i>The Gas-Light Phenomenon</i>	Professionals were convinced that the victims were unstable by the abusers to institutionalize them.
1970s	Case reports broaden perspective	Caretakers and staff gaslighted elderly patients in hospitals and care homes.
1980s	Shift to psychological mechanisms	Focus shifts to psychological mechanisms
2000s	Stern's <i>The Gaslight Effect</i> reaches mainstream	Showed what type of perpetrators are and that gaslighting thrives on victims' need for validation
2022	Merriam-Webster "Word of the Year"	The speech gave mainstream recognition in both the digital and organizational contexts.

Understanding gaslighting in the workplace

Workplace gaslighting is caused by small manipulations to distort the victim's perception of reality to make them second-guess their actions and abilities (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). For example, an employer could complain that the employee never finished the task, even though the individual is sure that they have completed the task, creating self-doubt and feeling like they're not appreciated if there are no timestamps to back this up. (Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Kukreja & Pandey, 2023) This shows that toxic co-workers would go out of their way to discredit and harm their colleagues, creating a work environment that's hostile and untrustworthy. This could create a heavy psychological baggage on the colleagues because places where gaslighting is present could lead to depression, anxiety, and damaged confidence and this could lead to damage and isolation, which could cause an individual to have long-term psychological trauma and reduces the productivity on the workplace (Hansen, Hogh, Persson, Karlson, Garde, & Ørbaek, 2006) Dealing with high and intense amounts of gaslighting could cause self-doubt in their understanding because, and the individual could might believe the gaslighter's manipulative narrative, making it difficult for the victim to connect, to understand their actual experiences (Hailes & Goodman, 2025).

To show how workplace gaslighting is different from other types of abuses and mistreatments that could happen in the workplace and organizational settings, Table 2 will show the difference between gaslighting and bullying, mobbing, and harassment.

Table 2: Types of Abuse

Abuse Type	Definition	Key Difference	Citations
Bullying	Repeated aggressive behavior that is aimed at humiliating or intimidating a specific individual	Direct, could be verbal or physical	(Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012)
Mobbing	Collective harassment or exclusion carried out by a group	Psychological terror resulting from coordinated group behavior	(Leymann, 1990)
Harassment	Unwanted discriminatory behavior based on characteristics such as gender or race	Most of the time, illegal and tied explicitly to protected identities	(Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009)
Gaslighting	A psychological manipulation that is hard to call out and affects an individual's perception of reality	Difficult to prove; undermines self-trust and cognitive confidence	(Ahern, 2018)

Psychological Mechanisms of Gaslighting and Emotional Manipulation

To understand how manipulation works, an individual must understand its psychological and structural mechanisms. People who exhibit personality traits could be associated with what Paulhus and Williams (2002) called the “Dark Triad.” This personality type has three main points: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. These traits indicate the person lacks empathy, desires control, and is willing to exploit individuals for their gain (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). On the other hand, the victims could be more susceptible because of factors like high levels of empathy, people-pleasing tendencies, having experienced abuse or trauma in the past, low self-esteem, or lack of a strong support system in general, especially in the hands of a narcissist (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000; Duffy & Sperry, 2014). However, regardless of their personality type, everybody could be a target because social influence carries an important role in enabling manipulative behaviors. For example, hierarchical structures, unclear performance expectations, and a lack of transparency in decision-making could enable manipulation in the work environment (Hofmann & Indjejikian, 2024). Organizational culture could prevent or enable manipulative behaviors, and emotional manipulation is experienced at low rates when the organization carries intense ethical climates and is accountable to structures (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

Effects on Individuals and Organizations

Gaslighting and emotional manipulation have a significant control over individuals' mental health. People who have this experience often deal with anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, and their professional performances decrease because of the persistent self-doubt undermining their productivity and creativity (Ciabatti, Nerini, & Matera, 2024; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007). This causes social withdrawal and could make victims avoid workplace interactions, making them more isolated. Abusive supervision also leads to higher turnover, lower job satisfaction, and issues between work and home life. The effects of manipulation also affect the entire organization because toxic behaviors reduce the consistency of teamwork, trust, and productivity. This toxicity could result in financial losses, lower productivity, reputational damage, and legal issues (Anjum, Ming, Siddiqi, & Rasool, 2018).

Table 3 will summarize the types of outcomes and their effects on individuals and the workplace because of the gaslighting.

Table 3. Types of Outcomes and Their Effects on Individuals and the Workplace

Outcome Type	Effect
Mental Health	Anxiety, stress
Performance	Lower productivity
Social Interaction	Withdrawal
Organizational Affects	Teamwork decline

Cultural and Organizational Factors

Some cultures are more enabling to manipulation than others. Highly competitive work environments often have behaviors like gaslighting because employees tend to focus on their success over collaboration (Salin, 2003). Leadership styles can also shape these types of dynamics, influencing whether manipulation becomes dominant (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). A lack of accountability in leadership and a laissez-faire leadership style do not enforce responsibility and create environments where manipulators can operate without consequences (Namie & Namie, 2011). These cultural and structural issues allow toxic behaviors to persist and shape how individuals interact in the organizational environment.

Face-to-Face versus Online and Hybrid systems

Gaslighting in the workplace can exist in both traditional face-to-face settings and newer hybrid or online systems. This chapter explains how manipulation can occur in each context by showing how power and control could be used for bad purposes in both in-person and digital circumstances.

In traditional in-person workplaces, bullying is a more direct and visible form of abuse that goes on over long periods of time. Research indicates that harmful actions that go on for long periods, that are supported by power imbalances and pressure, create environments where employees feel stigmatized, humiliated, or pressured to leave their jobs (Glambek, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2015). Face-to-face bullying affects daily working relationships, and it also has long-term consequences such as increased risk of job change, unemployment, or even leading to disability due to health issues. At the same time, evidence from organizational settings shows that bullying is strongly linked to emotional and physical health damage, which could include health issues such as depression and anxiety, fatigue, and burnout (Iftikhar, Qureshi, Qayyum, Fatima, Sriyanto, Indrianti, Khan, & Dana, 2021). Surveys further suggest that nearly one-third of employees have experienced in-person harassment during their careers, proving its global existence and the immediate need for support systems and solutions (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

After the hybrid and online work system became popular, a unique type of work culture started to exist, which created a new space for emotional manipulation. For example, digital communication platforms created new spaces that could cause “digital gaslighting” that was not present before this technology became popular. It could be caused by ignoring messages, manipulating digital time stamps, and creating group chats to isolate (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2021). As a result, organizations started to create new policies and training programs that are specifically designed for this, because traditional workplace dynamics may not be sufficient for virtual environments.

Strategies for Prevention and Intervention

Addressing workplace manipulation requires the efforts of both individuals and companies. Companies should have clear anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that include manipulation and gaslighting. There should be upward evaluation of the leaders, and people in leadership positions should be able to access training and support, such as new structures that could help the institution stop the development of toxic leadership dynamics (Fahie, 2019). Victims should keep a detailed record of the manipulative interactions to support their cases when they report them. Organizations need strong training programs to help reduce vulnerability and assertiveness, teaching employees how to set boundaries and communicate effectively (Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). To further this, peer support groups should be encouraged so that employees can share their experiences and coping strategies, creating a support network that can reduce the impact of isolation caused by manipulation (Van Heugten, 2010).

Bystanders and their effects on the prevention and Intervention

The study "Does Bystander Behavior Make a Difference? Understanding the Role of Bystanders in Workplace Bullying" (Ng et al., 2021) found two types of bystander responses: passive and active. Passive behaviors are usually connected with the "bystander effect" (Darley & Latané, 1968). This shows us that many people leaned into being a bystander. This does not mean that active bystanders' behaviors are irrelevant because their actions could make the situation go in a direction that could either help or harm the victim. Helpful responses like providing support or intervening directly can reduce the negative affect (Van Heugten, 2010). For example, Van Heugten (2010) found that these interactions increased the victim's confidence. Nickerson et al. (2014) state that training programs also reduce the chances of future victimization. This research proves that active bystanders help de-escalate situations and reduce long-term harm.

Legal and Ethical Analysis

Although gaslighting and emotional manipulation are not defined as illegal conduct in most cases, they still fall under a broader category of workplace harassment or creating a hostile work environment (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). For example, in "What gaslighting is not" (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023), it is stated that "Gaslighting should be differentiated from other harmful behaviors such as manipulation, lying, disagreement, guilt-tripping, stonewalling, ghosting, bullying, brainwashing, blackmailing, and name-calling" so we could understand the fine line between them. To provide a safe environment, organizations must be aware of their legal obligations and act when inappropriate behavior is committed (Namie & Namie, 2011). From an ethical perspective, companies are responsible for having a work culture that promotes respect and dignity. This means that not only do they have to address manipulation, but they also have to take actions that would make such behaviors unavailable. For example, some companies started to use AI tools after realizing that artificial intelligence and machine learning in workplace management could be beneficial. While AI tools can help companies spot patterns of behavior that are manipulative in digital communications, they also raise some questions about privacy and the possible misuse of this tool (Maiti, Kayal, & Vujko, 2025). Because of this, clear guard lines and AI tools in the workplace are crucial because transparency and employee consent are fundamental keystones for a comfortable work environment that are not up for debate.

Future Directions

This review proves that organizational gaslighting is conceptually connected to bullying, abuse, abusive supervision, and manipulation, but it is still insufficiently discussed in existing measures and models. Therefore, future research should focus on the following areas.

1. Clarity and measurement.

Scholarship should focus on developing cross-validated instruments. Therefore, it could separate gaslighting from overlapping topics, such as abusive supervision. This could be achieved by using longitudinal, multi-trait, multi-method designs and testing across different sectors and cultures.

2. Digital gaslighting.

Future studies should not ignore digital settings and purely focus on face-to-face gaslighting to make sure that methods such as selective timestamp manipulation, deleting messages, and intentional delays do not exist. To take things further, tools such as keeping digital trace data and collaboration platforms should be used to detect gaslighting.

3. Multilevel interventions.

These styles would work for different professions since they will make the employees feel like they belong, and they will improve their mental health. Moreover, they should especially focus on outcomes, like well-being and the feedback from the employees, so that the evaluations will be effective.

4. Economic and legal aspects.

To understand the economic and legal aspects, future research should use the information that human resources provide and the data on how much gaslighting in the workplace costs. To get a clear perspective, direct costs such as productivity loss, sudden quits, and replacements of the employees, and legalization fixes should be included in this (Hansen, Høgh, Persson, Karlson, Garde, & Ørbaek, 2006; Leymann, 1990).

5. Cross-cultural and sectoral aspects.

Both public and private organizations, healthcare, hospitality, and technology sectors should be included in the research and examinations to understand how the structural factors, such as hierarchical power and market effects, are affected by gaslighting (Hansen et al., 2006; Leymann, 1990).

Discussion

Workplace gaslighting is a concept where a pattern-shaped behavior is created to create both interpersonal manipulation and organizational failures. Studies prove that gaslighting occurs more strongly when workplaces lack accountability, transparency, and clear reporting structures, because this enables individuals with manipulative tendencies to influence norms and relationships (Hofmann & Indjeikian, 2024; O'Reilly et al., 1991). The findings in this review show that gaslighting is hard to detect because of its manipulative character. This ambiguous character also contributes to employees' self-doubt, emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal (Hansen et al., 2006; Leymann, 1990).

These studies also show that meaningful intervention is needed at different levels. For example, leadership behavior is crucial because the leadership style can both reinforce or stop manipulative dynamics. This shows that a leadership style that's emotionally intelligent or transformational could be helpful as a protective factor (Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990). Therefore, organizational strategies should ensure transparent communication, psychological safety should be crucial, and reporting systems should

be confidential. So, the chances of abuse decrease. In addition, employees should be empowered, and awareness should increase for bystanders, since active bystanders can interrupt harmful cycles, and passive bystander behavior often reinforces ongoing manipulation (Ng et al., 2021; Darley & Latané, 1968). Overall, this evidence shows that understanding gaslighting requires coordination in cultural, structural, and interpersonal aspects.

Conclusion

At first glance, gaslighting might not look like a significant issue, but it affects the workplace dynamics negatively, seriously. It also seriously damages workplace dynamics. Gaslighting damages both individuals and organizations with its manipulative character. However, it has a clear pattern that causes people to be uncertain of their own perceptions, damages mental health, and negatively affects the functioning of the workplace. Victims usually suffer from anxiety, depression, and stress, and it usually damages organizations by loss in productivity, and a toxic workplace culture (Hansen et al., 2006).

However, pinpointing only the toxic and difficult individuals would not solve the problem because this is a systemic issue. By looking at a personality aspect, it is clear that individuals who have certain vulnerable traits are more likely to be targets of gaslighting, and people who have manipulative traits like the Dark Triad are more likely to exploit others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). From an organisational perspective, this could lead to weaker accountability, blurry hierarchies, and careless leadership, which could cause manipulation and gaslighting to exist in the workplace without being noticed. From a cultural perspective, highly competitive workplaces that use digital systems could lead to new forms of manipulation, like digital gaslighting (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2021).

Therefore, the multiple layers this problem has require a solution that could work on different levels. For example, organizations should address gaslighting directly in their workplace policies and should not dismiss the problems as minor miscommunications. Everybody in the workplace should be transparent, such as keeping written records, documenting decisions correctly, and giving clear feedback. Workers should be trained on how their words and behaviors could affect the team dynamics because focusing on only ethics is not enough. Employees should have the resources to document incidents they experienced, should be able to set clear boundaries, and should feel like they can trust the organization to report the problems. This asks for a support network and teaching bystanders to step up and make sure the victim is not isolated (Darley & Latané, 1968).

In conclusion, a workplace where gaslighting isn't present would make the employees trust the organization, which is essential for a good workplace. This would protect the individuals and create a healthy workplace where people could feel secure, trust their judgment, be honest, and feel uplifted by each other. This environment would be ethical, productive, creative, and sustainable. Calling out gaslighting directly would create dynamics in organizations where strong collaboration skills and a healthy work environment are present.

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