**A Historical Review of Gaslighting:**

**Tracing Changing Conceptualizations Within Psychiatry and Psychology**

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**Abstrac**t

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that causes a victim to doubt their sense of reality, usually leading to a loss of agency (i.e., confidence and sense of self) and emotional and mental instability. The phenomenon was first identified over 50 years ago and discourse on the topic was largely confined to psychiatry/medicine; however, interest in gaslighting has experienced a resurgence with expansion both in terms of the contexts in which gaslighting is thought to occur as well as disciplines weighing in on the topic. Indeed, Merriam-Webster chose ‘gaslighting’ as its word of the year in 2022. The aim of this article is to offer a historical review of work on gaslighting that tracks how the term has evolved and to identify core features of the phenomena. In doing so we identify points of consensus and tension in the literature. We conclude by making specific recommendations for the future of scholarship on gaslighting.

*Keywords*: Gaslighting, relationships, abuse, history of psychology

**A Historical Review of Gaslighting:**

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Today, gaslighting is often viewed as occurring when a perpetrator tries to convince a target that the target is not of sound mind. Over the last several years the term gaslighting has captured the public’s attention. This surge of interest is evidenced by a 1,740% increase in web searches for the term in 2022, which led Merriam-Webster to choose ‘gaslighting’ as its 2022 word of the year (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Despite the term’s popularity there is some confusion about what constitutes, and how to define gaslighting. While gaslighting has only recently entered the zeitgeist the term has existed since the 1940s, and its meaning has shifted considerably throughout its use. At different points in time and in different disciplines, what is considered essential to gaslighting has varied. In this paper, we review this history; our purpose here is to give readers a sense of how the term has evolved over the years and across disciplines and to gain a clearer sense of the essence of the phenomenon. We focus on the fields of psychiatry and psychology in particular, as this is where most of the work to date has been conducted. We identify points of tension and agreement in the literature, and make several specific recommendations on how to study gaslighting moving forward. It is our hope that this review will provide historical context for future research on gaslighting and help clarify the term’s origins and meaning.

**Gaslighting**

The term gaslighting comes from a screenplay, later adapted to film in 1938 and 1944 titled Gaslight (e.g., Corfield & Dickinson, [1940](https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/doi/full/10.1111/pere.12510#pere12510-bib-0011); Wilkinson, 2017). In the film an older bachelor, Gregory, seduces a young heiress, Paula. The two quickly wed, at which point Gregory systematically isolates Paula by convincing here that she is losing her grasp on reality. Gregory hoped to have Paula committed so that he could rob her of highly valued family heirlooms. Meanwhile, Gregory flirts with their housemaid in front of Paula and attempts to turn the housemaid against her. At different points in the history of defining and describing gaslighting, the relative emphasis of certain aspects of the plot over others has shifted from the threat of institutionalization to infidelity, theft, and now to the target’s view of their own sanity.

While there is no universally agreed upon definition of gaslighting, there are core elements that are common to almost all modern descriptions of the phenomenon. Gaslighting involves a perpetrator who argues that the target is unable to properly grasp and form true beliefs about reality; in other words, that they are epistemically incompetent. This is done through a variety of tactics, most commonly through direct accusations of epistemic incompetence, such as calling the target ‘crazy’ and alleging that the target is imagining things. While most definitions of gaslighting depend on accusations of epistemic incompetence, not all accusations of epistemic incompetence involve accusations of insanity. For example, gaslighting also encompasses the claims that, due to their identity (e.g., race or gender), the target’s view of reality should not be taken seriously.

***The Gaslighting Phenomenon: A Cautionary Tale for Psychiatrists (1969 – 1979*)**

 The first discussions of gaslighting in the academic literature occurred in British psychiatry journals in the late 1960s. These early papers primarily describe cases of unjust institutionalization in psychiatric hospitals, rather than cases of trying to convince a target that they are ‘crazy’ per se. Barton and Whitehead laid the groundwork for the discussion of gaslighting in their article “The Gas-Light Phenomenon,” published in the *Lancet* in 1969. They warned readers that current legislation could potentially be abused if someone were to attempt to make a family member appear to be mentally disturbed; they referenced similar concerns, dating back to 1763, which noted that citizens could be unjustly institutionalized as a means of resolving family issues. They discussed three case studies that exemplified this sort of gaslighting. Overall, Barton and Whitehead viewed gaslighting as a conscious manipulative attempt to have a mentally well individual institutionalized on false pretenses for financial, emotional, or personal gain. The victim’s evaluation of their own mental wellness was not considered essential.

Changes in the conceptualization of gaslighting are scant in this early literature, mostly consisting of expansions of the specific details of what constitutes gaslighting and who perpetrates it. Smith and Sinanan (1972) expand on Barton and Whitehead by including cases in which a perpetrator attempts to have a target institutionalized in a general hospital, rather than a psychiatric hospital. Lund and Gardiner (1977) broaden the scope of who can perpetrate gaslighting by describing a case in which, rather than being gaslighted by one’s family, an elderly woman is gaslighted by workers at her care-home. Finally, Sheikh (1979) describes a case that does not involve any attempt at institutionalization on false pretenses. Here, the perpetrators convince an elderly relative to move into their flat, and then attempt to convince a physician that their relative has dementia and thus should forfeit control of their finances; no attempt at institutionalization is described. Resonating with Barton and Whitehead, it is a medical professional who must be convinced of the target’s epistemic incompetence, not the target herself. In this early literature discussions of the perpetrators’ motivations for gaslighting are kept brief; similarly, the psychological states of the target and perpetrators are kept brief, if mentioned at all. In general, little attention paid to the epistemic and/or emotionally abusive features of gaslighting that have taken center stage more recently (Lund & Gardiner, 1977; Sheikh, 1979; Smith & Sinanan, 1972).

The unifying purpose of this early body of work was to caution healthcare professionals to possible cases in which a ‘bad actor’ attempts to have a target institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital, or otherwise stripped of their legal autonomy, on false pretenses, to attain a specific goal, such as acquiring a divorce, or financial assets. Critically, in all these early case studies it is the target’s insistence that they are sane, healthy, and able to make decisions for themselves that alerts the professionals to the abuse; and it is this insistence that professionals are being warned to take seriously.

In sum, the conceptualization of gaslighting used in this early literature is quite different from modern conceptualizations. The primary person who must be convinced of the target’s epistemic incompetence is usually a medical professional. Little attention is paid to internal states of the target or the gaslighter. Subsequent work, spearheaded by psychodynamic researchers, would turn the focus to the psychological states, motivations, and mechanisms at play for both the target and gaslighter. This change in focus resulted in a changing definition of gaslighting that highlights how close other’s accusations of epistemic incompetence affected targets. This new definition of gaslighting corresponds to how it is commonly understood today—namely, the internalization of accusations of being ‘crazy’.

***Psychosis Imposed on Another: Psychodynamic Work on Gaslighting (1981 – 1996)***

The early gaslighting literature was written during a period of reform in how mental health was treated in Western society. During this period of ‘deinstitutionalization,’ the large, long-stay psychiatric hospitals that had been the primary point of care for psychiatric illness since the 19th century were increasingly viewed as inhumane and cruel. Throughout the 1960s and 70s these institutions lost public support and funding, leading many of them to close (Fakhoury & Priebe, 2007). It is very likely that, by the 1980s, the closure of these institutions made the strategy describe in the early gaslighting literature less viable and common. Thus, deinstitutionalization may be a major socio-historical driver of the change in how gaslighting was conceptualized during the 1980s by psychodynamic researchers.

***Psychodynamic Work on Gaslighting: Calef and Weinshel (1981)***

 Calef and Weinshel’s 1981 article, “Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting,” published in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, was the first publication to discuss the potential psychological mechanisms underlying the gaslighter’s behaviors, and the consequences of those behaviors for targets. As evidenced in the quote below, they highlight, for the first time, the centrality of epistemic incompetence. They define gaslighting as follows:

It is, first of all, a piece of behavior in which one individual, with varying degrees of success, attempts to influence the judgment of a second individual by causing the latter to doubt the validity of his or her own judgment. The motivation may be conscious, although it is usually unconscious; and almost invariably the conscious motives are rationalizations and/or distortions of deeper, more complex, and less acceptable motives. The victim becomes uncertain and confused in regard to his or her assessment of internal or external perceptions and the integrity of his or her reality testing. (pg. 52)

This conceptualization of gaslighting differs in important ways from early descriptions of gaslighting. First, now the targets themselves must be convinced that they are epistemically incompetent, not psychiatrists or other hospital staff. Second, whereas earlier psychiatric discussions of gaslighting assumed the perpetrators’ motives were explicit, Calef and Weinshel allow for the possibility that perpetrators are unaware of their own motivations and even unaware of their own gaslighting behavior. Third, rather than gaslighters being motivated by clear and situationally specific aims (e.g., divorce or financial gain), Calef and Weinshel’s description of gaslighters’ motivations are more emotional in nature, and hint at chronic unmet psychological needs—namely, control, greed, and/or desire to avoid accountability for bad behavior. Fourth, in their discussion, we see the suggestion that gaslighting causes confusion and uncertainty in targets themselves. At its core, in their perspective, gaslighting is viewed as an insecure perpetrator attempting to convince a target that they (the target) are epistemically incompetent, or otherwise unable to accurately perceive and respond to reality. Overall, this view of gaslighting presents a far less specific behavior than the earlier framing suggests and is closer to how the term is used today.

Calef and Weinshel (1981) also discuss two psychodynamic processes that are similar to gaslighting: *projective identification* and the *double bind*. Projective identification involves projection of unwanted parts of oneself onto another individual. Once the other individual has accepted the projected content, the projector is able to control that individual ‘from within’ and continues to make the other individual act in accordance with the projected psychic content. The projector is then able to process that content through its expression by the other individual. Within this framework, a gaslighter who, for example, is insecure about their own intelligence may consistently accuse a target of being stupid, to project this insecurity onto the target, and then attempt to control the target, thereby controlling their own (projected) insecurity about their own intelligence. The term ‘double bind’ comes from psychoanalytic studies of schizophrenic patients. It refers to situations in which a person communicates two mutually exclusive messages about how they want another person to behave (Bateson et al., 1956). For example, a perpetrator who is isolating a target may verbally insist that he is fine with his partner going out to a party, but may stand blocking the doorway with his arms crossed, nonverbally communicating that the target is not free to leave.

A third major contribution of Calef and Weinshel’s article (1981) is that it is the first attempt to systematically analyze the psychological mechanisms that underlie gaslighting. In contrast to the earlier cold and impersonal discussions of targets (e.g., listing only a target’s age, length of marriage, and number of children) Calef and Weinshel humanize the targets and perpetrators (e.g., discussing the target’s personal and family history in detail). They introduce fine grained descriptions of everyday behaviours that constitute or are similar to gaslighting. Finally, their suggestion that gaslighting is common and ubiquitous also foreshadows the application of the term to a wide variety of interpersonal contexts, ranging from such dyadic relationships as romantic partners, parent-child, and therapist-client relationships, to more amorphous relationships such as those occurring in the workplace, as well as relationships that are more unidirectional in nature, for example, politicians addressing the public.

***Psychodynamic Work on Gaslighting: Gass and Nichols (1988)***

In addition to centering the experience of gaslighting targets, it was psychodynamic researchers who first identified the relationship between gaslighting and having a marginalized identity. Indeed, today, gaslighting is often discussed as it relates to testimonial injustice, which is the harm that occurs when one assigns less credibility to a speaker due to one’s prejudice against some aspect of the speaker’s identity (Fricker, 2007) as well as how it relates to race (e.g., Davis & Ernst, 2019; Roberts & Andrews, 2013). Individuals with marginalized identities frequently have their perspectives dismissed or ignored, and are thus often the targets of testimonial injustice.

In 1988, Gass and Nichols published “Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome” in the *Journal of Contemporary Family Therapy*. They viewed gaslighting as being a common behavior performed by adulterous husbands to conceal their extra-marital affairs. The primary motivation for gaslighting was avoiding accountability, and it was enacted primarily through husbands’ denial of things their wives had seen, thought, or felt. These attempts at denying and discrediting their wives’ testimonies often invoke sexist stereotypes, such as the view of women as irrational, overly emotional, and jealous. According to Gass and Nichols, husbands did not necessarily intend to drive their wives insane, but their attempts to avoid accountability resulted in their wives questioning their own sanity. Thus, a key insight made by Gass and Nichols is that what qualifies as gaslighting depends more on the target’s experience than the perpetrator’s intention.

Gass and Nichols (1988) also discuss gaslighting in the therapeutic context, again highlighting sexist stereotypes and women’s vulnerability. Specifically, they suggest that male therapists may unwittingly contribute to gaslighting of their female patients/clients, due to the influence of sexism in the therapists’ implicit attitudes and automatic reactions—for example, labelling women as insecure, jealous, or masochistic. According to Gass and Nichols, therapists who are making use of these labels do so because of the influence of a sexist society; they suggest that therapists make themselves aware of the sexist labels that are applied to women and understand how this can undermine women’s perspectives and testimonies. This work foreshadows future discussions of the more general role of therapists in gaslighting (e.g., Dorpat, 1996); it also foreshadows discussion of gaslighting that centers on the usage of stereotypes about marginalized individuals, which often makes use of critical theory (e.g. Roberts & Andrews, 2013).

***Psychodynamic Work on Gaslighting: Dorpat (1996)***

The most thorough treatment of gaslighting from a psychoanalytic perspective is Theodore Dorpat’s 1996 book, “Gaslighting: The Double Whammy, Interrogation, and Other Methods of Covert Control in Psychotherapy and Analysis”. Dorpat’s book is primarily a critique of psychodynamic therapist methods. He situates gaslighting within a taxonomy of terms (see Figure 1), and views gaslighting as a form of covert control. Covert methods of interpersonal control include projective identification, with gaslighting being a subtype of projective identification. Thus, while Calef and Weinshel view projective identification as being related to gaslighting, Dorpat views gaslighting as a form of projective identification. Dorpat views covert methods of interpersonal control as a ubiquitous aspect of communication in western society, and gaslighting as the most commonly used method. The view of gaslighting as frequent or even ubiquitous differs significantly from early conceptualizations but is agreed upon by several psychodynamic researchers.

<Insert Figure 1. Here>

Like Calef and Weinshel, Dorpat (1996) believes that gaslighting is primarily perpetrated unconsciously, and that targets are usually unaware of the gaslighting as well. In the first chapter, Dorpat gives the following definition of gaslighting:

“Gaslighting involves one person (or sometimes a group of persons). The victimizer (who tries to impose his or her judgment on a second person, a target), and a second person, the victim. This imposition is carried out by the “transfer”, via projective identification, of disturbing unconscious contents from the victimizer to the victim. Gaslighting often evokes disturbing emotions, low self-esteem, and cognitive dyscontrol by causing the individual to question his own abilities for thinking, perceiving, and reality testing. Along with the emergence of self-doubt and diminished self-esteem, they also may develop confusion, anxiety, depression, and in a few cases, psychosis.” (pg. 33-34)

Dorpat (1996) provides several fine-grained behavioural descriptions of gaslighting, demonstrating specific language that not only undermines the target’s epistemic competence but also casts the target in a morally dubious light. Dorpat states that such interactions leave the target feeling hurt, but unable to express exactly why they feel this way, as the words that were explicitly spoken seem benign on the surface. This notion of ‘plausible deniability’ is, in our view, a key insight to the phenomena of gaslighting. Dorpat also gives special attention to a particular technique he coined, the *double whammy*. The double whammy consists of two sequential projective identifications. First, the perpetrator verbally attacks, demeans, insults, or otherwise hurts the target. Second, the target calls out this harmful behavior, which triggers the perpetrator’s second projective identification, namely denying the validity of the target’s read on the situation, thereby denying the validity of the protest. Dorpat gives several examples of the double whammy including:

Mother: ‘Everything you do turns to shit!’

 Daughter: ‘Ouch! That’s mean! I wish you wouldn’t say that.’

 Mother: ‘You have no sense of humor. I was only kidding.’ (pg. 41)

Dorpat (1996) explains that such sarcastic joking, as what the mother is claiming to be doing in the above vignette, usually includes ‘metacommunications’, such as a raised eyebrow or exaggerated tone. In the double whammy, the first projective identification (“Everything you do turns to shit!”) is presented without any of these crucial metacommunications, thereby generating a confusing ambiguity. If the target points out the hurtful nature of the first comment, the gaslighter capitalizes on this ambiguity by suggesting that the target is somehow deficient in their ability to accurately perceive the social situation, thereby adding insult to injury.

In many ways Dorpat’s (1996) operationalization of gaslighting is a natural extension of earlier psychoanalytic discussions of gaslighting, especially Calef and Weinshel’s (1981) paper. That said, Dorpat’s book is uniquely thorough and remains the lengthiest academic discussion of gaslighting to date. There are several features of Dorpat’s view of gaslighting that are more consistent with how the term is commonly understood today compared to early work. Dorpat focuses on the perpetrators’ attempts to convince their targets that their (the target’s) perceptions, opinions, and memories are false, whereas little to no attention is given to attempts to convince *others* (e.g., medical professionals) of the target’s epistemic incompetence. Dorpat’s view that gaslighting is motivated by a desire for power and control is consistent with work that succeeded him. However, his suggestion that gaslighting is typically unconscious is more controversial in the subsequent literature. Furthermore, Dorpat brings the role of social power and gender to the forefront of his discussion of gaslighting. Until this point, the impact of social power and gender in gaslighting had been left implicit, aside from Gass and Nichol’s (1988) work on gaslighting in adulterous marriages. Today social power is frequently viewed as relevant to gaslighting (e.g, Ahern, 2018; Davis & Ernst, 2019; McKinnon, 2017)

In sum, the most significant changes in the conceptualization of gaslighting occurred during the post-deinstitutionalization period described above. First, the notion of gaslighting ceased to depend on the gaslighter convincing third parties that the victim is epistemically incompetent. In the 1980s, the essential element of gaslighting shifted to convincing the target that they are epistemically incompetent. Consequently, the target’s self-doubt and confusion are emphasized in this body of literature. Second, motives for gaslighting shifted from material to emotional, with desire for interpersonal control and/or avoiding accountability being highlighted. Third, behavioural descriptions of gaslighting shift from explicit acts (requesting institutionalization) to more subtle communications and, in particular, actions with a high degree of plausible deniability (cf. Dorpat). Relatedly, understanding of the gaslighter’s underlying motives shifted from being intentional to less intentional and, possibly, unconscious.). Finally, fifth, whereas gaslighting was originally seen as a relatively rare phenomena, it is increasingly viewed as common—even “ubiquitous” (cf. Dorpat)—due in large part to sociological forces such as systemic sexism that are thought to promote gaslighting.

***Bringing Gaslighting to the Public: Stern’s Gaslight Effect (2008)***

To the best of our knowledge, no academic work on gaslighting was published from 1996-2013; nonetheless, the construct underwent significant development during this time. In 2008, Dr. Robin Stern, a psychotherapist, published a self-help book titled “The Gaslight Effect: How to spot and survive the hidden manipulation others use to control your life”. The book’s content is inspired by Stern’s own personal experience, the experiences of her friends, and the experiences of clients at her psychotherapy practice. Stern’s book is often credited with being the work that brought the phenomenon into popular awareness (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Stark, 2019), and has been used to operationalize gaslighting in subsequent academic work (e.g., Graves & Samp, 2021).

Stern provides the following definition of gaslighting in the introduction to the second edition of the books (2018):

“Gaslighting, is a type of emotional manipulation in which a gaslighter tries to convince you that you’re misremembering, misunderstanding, or misinterpreting your own behaviors or motivations, thus creating doubt in your mind that leaves you vulnerable or confused.” (pg xx)

This definition is consistent with the aforementioned prior work in that it sheds any attempt at institutionalization, and is not specific about the types of relationships in which gaslighting can occur. Notably, the focus is on attempts to convince the target that they are incorrect about their own experiences or grasp on the world. While Stern’s training is in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, she notably discards the psychodynamic language of ‘projected psychic content’ and thus her book is more accessible to a general audience. Stern’s definition allows for gaslighting to be much more ubiquitous than most previous definitions. Indeed, she states that we live in a ‘gaslight culture’ (pg. 27), though she does not go as far as Dorpat (1996), who argued that gaslighting is an intrinsic part of communication in a western context. That said, Stern is clear that she views broader sociologically features of society as impacting who is targeted by gaslighting.

One novel aspect of Stern’s perspective is that she emphasizes the target’s active role in enabling gaslighting, referring to gaslighting as a dynamic process between two parties. In Stern’s view, it is the target’s need for the gaslighter’s approval that enables the gaslighting; the flipside of this, however, is that the target is empowered to end their own suffering by deciding to no longer have their sense of self-worth depend on the abuser. Stern also highlights additional motives—namely, the gaslighter’s insecurity, a need to be right, and a need to feel powerful. Thus, as with Dorpat, Stern’s conceptualization of gaslighting does not necessarily feature gaslighters who are motivated by material or financial gains, but rather by psychological and emotional ones.

 Stern’s book represents the first attempt to differentiate between types of gaslighters. Stern organizes gaslighters into three categories. Glamour gaslighters avoid accountability for their poor and neglectful behaviour by using grandiose gifts and romantic gestures to distract their partners, insisting that the glamourous plans and gifts should be enjoyed in the present moment, to distract from the discussion of unpleasant disagreements. Good-guy gaslighters require that their partners view them as morally ‘good’ and respectful of their needs, but nonetheless are uncompromising about getting their own way. Finally, intimidator gaslighters use punishment and verbal aggression to impose their narrative on their partners. Stern’s three gaslighters are used in later empirical research.

Stern discusses gaslighting within romantic, familial, and workplace relationships. Furthermore, Stern insists that anyone of any gender can be a target or perpetrator of gaslighting. That said, she does remark that women are more frequently targets of gaslighting and attributes this gender difference to a reactionary response to women’s changing roles in society, in addition to women’s marginalized identity (cf. Gass & Nichols, 1988). Specifically, according to Stern, as women have achieved greater gender equality, gaslighters (primarily men) have become insecure about their own interpersonal power.

Stern’s self-help book is important for several reasons. First, as noted, it is credited with bringing the term into popular awareness and is even used to operationalize and measure gaslighting. Second, Stern’s book provides a definition and explanation of gaslighting and its psychological effects, which are broadly applicable and free of complex psychodynamic terminology. Third, Stern’s suggestion that increased levels of gaslighting may be a means for socially dominant groups to covertly control disadvantaged groups who are becoming less subjugated highlights the socio-historical processes that contribute to gaslighting. Finally, Stern’s book contains a list of questions that readers are meant to ask themselves in order to determine if they are experiencing gaslighting. This list of items has been used in contemporary quantitative research, published in peer-reviewed journals several times. Currently several attempts to develop validated self-report measures of gaslighting victimization are under-way using factor analytic tools (e.g. Bhatti et al., 2021; Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). But, outside of these scale development efforts, Stern’s items remain the primary quantitative measure of gaslighting.

***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting***

 Public and academic interest in gaslighting skyrocketed during former U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s rise to power. This is likely due to the application of the term to Trump by several media outlets, who argued that he was abusing the epistemic authority associated with the president’s office (e.g., Dominus, 2016; Ghitis, 2017; Nast, 2016). Growing public interest (Figure 2) corresponded with a large spike in research papers on gaslighting starting in 2016 (Figure 3). This explosion of interest was not limited to psychology; after 2016, the phenomenon of gaslighting drew attention from philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, and even health care practitioners.At this point scholars began to discuss gaslighting not only as an interpersonal process that happens in dyads or small groups, but also as a socio-historical process, perpetrated by large groups against other large groups (e.g., Roberts and Andrew, 2013).

<Insert Figure 2. Here>

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***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting: Philosophy***

At the same time that Stern published her book, gaslighting was also becoming a topic of interest in philosophy. Indeed, much of the contemporary work on gaslighting is written by philosophers, primarily social epistemologists working within an epistemic injustice framework. The concept of *epistemic injustice* was developed by Miranda Fricker (2007) and is defined as an act that harms someone in their capacity as a ‘knower’. Gaslighting is frequently referred to as a subtype of epistemic injustice, namely, testimonial injustice, which occurs when one assigns less credibility to a speaker because of one’s prejudice against some aspect of the speaker’s identity. These discussions of gaslighting are primarily concerned with the role of various forms of prejudice play in gaslighting that was first identified by Gass and Nichols (1988), Dorpat (1996), and, then, Stern (2008).

The first philosophy paper on gaslighting that we know of is “Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting”, written by Kate Abramson (2014). Abramson’s main goal is to explicate precisely what is morally wrong with gaslighting. Abramson views gaslighting as immoral because it (a) attempts to destroy a person’s sense of self and faith in their own perspective (b) silences the gaslightee, (c) uses leverage stemming from power inequities to manipulate the gaslightee, and (d) objectifies the victim.

Abramson’s discussion of the moral wrongs of gaslighting requires her to discuss some of the psychological features of gaslighters, gaslightees, and the psychological effects of gaslighting itself. Like the psychoanalysts, Abramson does not believe that gaslighters are necessarily aware of their own gaslighting or motivations for gaslighting. She is sympathetic to the view that gaslighting is a subtype of projective identification but does not believe that the idea of projective identification fully captures all instances of gaslighting. Abramson takes issue with the notion that gaslighters are motivated to project some aspect of their own psychology that they are uncomfortable with onto the victim. Instead, Abramson, borrowing from Stern’s earlier work, views the main chronic underlying motivation of the gaslighter as being a complete inability to tolerate any sort of challenge or disagreement from the target. This chronic motivation distinguishes gaslighting from other types of manipulation, where the manipulator may be satisfied if they are able to convince the victim’s peers (but not the victim themselves) that the victim is epistemically incompetent.

Abramson provides the following definition of gaslighting:

a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy. Gaslighting is, even at this level, quite unlike merely dismissing someone, for dismissal simply fails to take another seriously as an interlocutor, whereas gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor. It almost always involves multiple incidents that take place over long stretches of time; it frequently involves multiple parties playing the role of gaslighter or cooperating with a gaslighter; it frequently involves isolating the target in various ways. (pg. 2)

Abramson’s definition reinforces certain aspects of previous definitions of gaslighting, in particular the psychoanalytic view that it is perpetrated unconsciously. Somewhat unlike the psychoanalytic view, Abramson views successful gaslighting as having a victim who accepts the proposition that they are ‘crazy’ and therefore looses their sense of self, whereas the psychoanalytic view may suggest that the effects of gaslighting are indistinguishable from psychosis itself. Abramson additionally emphasizes the involvement of ‘multiple parties’, ‘long stretches of time’, and attempts at isolation, all of which are present in Stern’s work. Lastly, Abramson’s explicit distinction of gaslighting from other types of dismissal is useful. For Abramson, it is this distinction that separates gaslighting from Amanda Fricker’s concept of testimonial injustice, in particular it is not a necessary component of testimonial injustice that the perpetrator insist that the victim accept their own epistemic incompetence. That being said, it is entirely possible that being a victim of testimonial injustice could have a destabilizing effect on victims that is similar to, or the same as, gaslighting, despite the different motivations and desires of perpetrators of each. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that testimonial injustice may play into gaslighting, as defined by Abramson, for example a gaslighter may make use of negative stereotypes to erode victim’s faith in their own sense of reality.

Rachel McKinnon (2017) makes a distinction between psychological gaslighting and *epistemic gaslighting*. According to McKinnon, psychological gaslighting is the phenomenon displayed in the 1944 film and involves a perpetrator who purposefully manipulates a target’s environment to cause them to doubt their own memory and perception. In contrast to Abramson, epistemic gaslighting is described as a form of testimonial injustice, which is denying or downplaying someone’s testimony because of some aspect of their identity. For example, denying or downplaying marginalized individuals’ testimony about experiences of discrimination and prejudice represents a failure to give those individuals appropriate levels of epistemic trust; due to their own identities and experiences, marginalized individuals ought to be considered well suited to correctly identify prejudice and discrimination. Thus, these acts of denial and doubt are both a form of gaslighting and testimonial injustice. McKinnon’s paper focuses specifically on how self-proclaimed “allies” (i.e., members of activists communities who claim to be supportive of marginalized community members) may use their status as allies to gaslight trans-women. According to McKinnon, epistemic gaslighting often involves invoking, at least sub-textually, common stereotypes such as “(trans) women[*sic*]” being ‘emotional’ or ‘over sensitive’.

While philosophers such as McKinnon have discussed how an individual’s minority status may put that individual at risk of, and enable, gaslighting, other philosophers have discussed mechanisms that underlie gaslighting irrespective of the target’s minority status. Andrew Spear (2019) discusses the role of belief and trust in gaslighting victimization. According to Spear, epistemic trust (i.e., the target’s trust in the gaslighter’s ability to grasp and convey true knowledge) is leveraged by the gaslighter to gain control of the target by first getting the target to doubt their own ability to judge reality; once the target accepts that they are somehow deficient, the gaslighter then makes use of this ‘fact’ to avoid accountability for his or her actions. In this view, gaslighting puts the target in a state of cognitive dissonance, where they must choose among his or her (1) own view of reality, (2) own epistemic self-trust, and (3) trust of the gaslighter, including the gaslighter’s view of the target as epistemically untrustworthy. Leverage and trust are crucial to the gaslighter’s ability to nudge the target toward accepting the gaslighter’s views. The target’s trust in the gaslighter is a necessary condition for successful gaslighting, regardless of whether the gaslighting tactics are subtle emotional manipulations, or whether they are explicit attempts to disorient the target (Spear, 2019).

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky has distinguished between first and second order gaslighting (2020). According to Podosky (2021) whether gaslighting is of the first or second order depends on the source of disagreement. In first order gaslighting, the gaslighter and target have a shared concept. For example, they both may agree that purposefully grasping a co-worker’s bottom would be a case of sexual assault, but there is disagreement about whether a particular instance is an example of this shared concept of sexual assault. For example, in response to a target’s claim that she has been purposefully touched inappropriately, a gaslighter may insist that it must have been done by accident. Contrastingly, in second order gaslighting, the gaslighter doubts the accuracy of the target’s concepts. For example, in response to a target reporting this act, a gaslighter would claim that a co-worker grasping another’s bottom is never (whether purposefully or accidentally) a case of sexual assault. In first order gaslighting, targets are led to doubt their interpretive abilities, but not their general understanding of the world. In second order gaslighting, targets are made to doubt the very concepts through which they understand the world, in general. Whether these two types of gaslighting are distinct in practice and have distinct psychological outcomes is a question that may be of relevance to both ongoing scale development projects and the psychological inquiry into gaslighting more broadly.

Philosophers have also weighed in on potential mechanisms for reducing the harm of gaslighting. Recently, the philosopher Katherine Anna Sodoma has discussed how doubting versus empathizing with another’s emotions affects gaslighting victimization and recovery from gaslighting, respectively (2022). She focuses her discussion on “emotional gaslighting” (i.e., undermining target’s confidence in their own emotions, and judgements resulting from those emotions) and argues that emotions play an “important epistemic role” (pg. 6). In other words, emotions play an important role in the generation of accurate knowledge and beliefs about the world. Thus, casting doubt on the reasonableness of a person’s emotional reaction, when those emotional reactions are, in fact, reasonable (for example, when one has legitimately been mistreated and is angry as a result), therefore undermines the doubted individual’s means of making informed decisions about the world, thereby disrupting that individual’s epistemic agency. In many ways, this notion is reminiscent of Dorpat’s double whammy. Sodoma suggests that when a target’s peers meet them with affective empathy, this may counteract some of the harms of gaslighting (at least under certain conditions). Thus, she identifies affective empathy as an antidote to emotional gaslighting, defining affective empathy as a process in which one first “imaginatively engages with another person’s situation from their point of view” and then “comes to experience an emotional reaction to the imagined scenario” (pg. 8).

In essence, affective empathy validates the target’s emotions and experience. If an empathizer believes that the target’s emotional reaction is reasonable and subsequently communicates this to the target, then affective empathy can fulfill the target’s need for epistemic reassurance. This reassurance communicates to the target that both their judgement and means of reaching that judgement are reasonable. According to Sodoma, the ability of affective-empathetic endorsements of the target’s emotional reactions to combat gaslighting depends, in part, on the extent to which the target is aware that they are being gaslighted and currently doubting their own cognitive abilities. If the target is not yet aware of being gaslighted and/or has lost faith in their own cognitive abilities, then reassurance may not provide an antidote to gaslighting. Reassurance caused by affective empathy may be a particularly potent cure to gaslighting when it is endorsing the exact sort of reaction that the gaslighter is trying to undermine. Another point we would highlight is that the effectiveness of affective empathy as an antidote to gaslighting depends on whether the target is willing to trust the perspective of the third-party empathizer (over that of the gaslighter).

In sum, recent philosophical work has formalized older insights about how aspects of one’s identity may make them more vulnerable to gaslighting, by applying the epistemic injustice framework to gaslighting. The psychological mechanisms underlying gaslighting and recovery from gaslighting have also recently been modernized by Spear and Sodoma respectively. Both Spear and Sodoma shed earlier psychodynamic mechanisms in favour of more readily demonstrable, measurable psychological features such as cognitive dissonance and affective empathy.

Up to this point, our review has primarily focused on theoretical contributions to our understanding of gaslighting. However, there has been growing interest in studying gaslighting from an empirical perspective although, to date, there are only a handful of published papers on the topic (see table 1 for details on empirical research on gaslighting). Many recent data-driven publications on gaslighting have been qualitative in nature, focusing primarily on either gaslighting in clinical contexts (e.g., hospitals, psychotherapy, etc.) or romantic relationships.

<Insert Table 1. Here>

***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting: Empirical Papers on Close Relationships***

Gaslighting is often viewed as a means through which individuals exert influence on those whom they have power over. Thus, empirical investigations of the role of power in gaslighting are of great interest. Graves and Samp (2021) investigated the relationship between a specific type of power, namely dependence power, and the experience of gaslighting. Dependence power is a function of each person’s commitment to the relationship; dependence power is high when one has low commitment and their partner has high commitment. Graves and Samp predicted that dependence power would be negatively associated with gaslighting victimization. A hierarchical linear regression analysis supported this hypothesis, but visual inspection of a scatterplot indicated a curvilinear relationship between dependence power and gaslighting victimization. Graves and Samp conclude that those with high or low levels of dependence power were more likely to be targets of gaslighting than those with average levels of dependence power. While unexpected, a curvilinear relationship between power and gaslighting is consistent with psychodynamic perspectives on gaslighting. In Dorpat’s words, gaslighting is covert, it depends on plausible deniability. Thus, low power individuals may rely on gaslighting to exercise control in their relationships, as they lack the power to engage in more explicit types of control, whereas for high power individuals gaslighting is just one of many viable control tactics.

Other researchers have focused on identifying individual difference factors that may be risk factors. Miano, Bellomare, and Genova (2021) conducted a study on the personality traits of targets and perpetrators of gaslighting. The authors draw on Calef and Weinshel (1981) in defining gaslighting, describing it as an abusive attempt to control the “sensations, thoughts, actions, affective state and even self-perception and reality testing” (pg. 285) of the target.

Miano et al. (2021) used 20 questions from Stern’s (2008) book as their measure of ‘gaslighting experience’ (i.e., symptomatic reaction to gaslighting). For their measure of partner gaslighting behavior, they used 25 questions, also from Stern, to categorize gaslighters into three types (good-guy, glamor, or intimidator). Both participant and their partner’s (as perceived by participants) personality traits were measured using the personality inventory for the DSM-5. The authors found no significant gender differences in the experience of gaslighting—that is, men reported equal amounts of gaslighting victimization and perpetration as women, nor did they find any age differences. Psychoticism was positively related to all three types of gaslighting (good-guy, glamor, and intimidator), detachment was positively associated with glamor gaslighting, and disinhibition with good-guy gaslighting. Antagonism was positively associated with glamour and good-guy, but not intimidator gaslighting. Participants own disinhibition scores were positively related to all three types of partner gaslighting, and participant antagonism was positively related to glamour, and good-guy gaslighting. Of note, the association between psychoticism and gaslighting perpetration verifies the proposed association between gaslighters and cluster-B personality traits present in earlier self-help literature (e.g., Sarkis, 2018). This study represents one of the first attempts to identify the personality traits that are risk factors for both gaslighting perpetration and victimization. That said, a limitation of this study is that the participants reported on their partner’s personality with no objective measures; thus, what this study shows are the characteristics that target’s think perpetrators possess.

A qualitative study[[1]](#footnote-2) on gaslighting in romantic relationships identified core aspects of gaslighting, how gaslighting develops throughout the time course of a relationship, the social and psychological consequences of gaslighting, and behaviors that promote recovery from gaslighting (Klein et al., 2023). According to this study, romantic relationships that devolve into gaslighting frequently start with a period of abnormally intense courting known as ‘love-bombing’. *Love-bombing* may consist of positive, but emotionally intense interactions, commitments (or discussion of commitments) that are inappropriate for early stages of a relationship, and grandiose displays of affection, including expensive gifts. Examples of love-bombing include showering with praise and affection, giving especially expensive and/or particularly intimate gifts, suggesting a romantic weekend getaway, or even confessions of love very early on in a relationship. Love-bombing is theorized to establish a powerful emotional bond and motivate targets to ignore and rationalize signs of abuse.

Many participants reported becoming socially isolated throughout their gaslighting relationship, usually due to their partner’s actions. Social isolation is theorized to facilitate gaslighting by cutting targets off from hearing negative feedback about their partner, as well as by making targets increasingly dependent on the perpetrator for meeting their social and emotional needs. Targets reported that their partner’s unpredictable behavior, demeaning insults, strict rules, and constant blame resulted in feelings of a diminished sense of self, a loss of agency, feelings of insanity, and a general mistrust of others. These psychological changes are theorized to increase the target’s social isolation and dependence on the perpetrator, thereby forming a feedback loop which may intensify the abuse (Klein et al., 2023).

While not all targets of gaslighting reported that they had recovered from the experience, those who had recovered often emphasized the importance of separating from the gaslighter, re-establishing a social life, spending time in nature, performing physical activities, and pursuing creative hobbies. The role of reconnecting with non-abusive close others in recovery observed in this study is consistent with Sodoma’s proposition that being met with affective empathy may help undue the psychological harm of gaslighting. Many of the activities that promoted recovery are ‘re-embodying’ in nature, for example mindfulness, yoga, and journaling (Klein et al., 2023).

While this study did not directly assess perpetrators of gaslighting, two major themes emerged regarding perpetrator’s motivations (at least from the perspective of the target’s). The first was a desire to avoid accountability, often for infidelity. The second pattern was a more general motivation for control over the target. This study offers some of the finest grain insights into gaslighting in romantic relationships that is available in the peer-reviewed literature, and additionally provides insight into the entire time course of relationships where gaslighting occurs.

Another recent qualitative study interviewed 14 survivors of gaslighting in the context of IPV (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). This analysis revealed two main clusters. First, gaslighting occurred in several domains including survivor’s memory, interpretation of their own experience, mental status, fundamental traits, abilities, and value to others. The second cluster was the lasting impact gaslighting had on survivors, and how survivors coped and healed from this abuse. All survivors experienced self-doubt regarding at least some of the gaslighting domains. The degree of doubt varied between participants and across time within participants. The effect of gaslighting impacted participant’s view of their own epistemic abilities even after the gaslighting ended. For example, participants frequently doubted their memory and knowledge long after exiting the relationship, felt worthless, and felt more dependent on others. This reduced epistemic self-trust was experienced as distressing. Contrastingly, some participant’s reported that they developed a great degree of self-trust, both within and outside the gaslighting relationship. The finding that most survivors of gaslighting had lasting negative impacts, while a minority experienced personal growth is consistent with Klein et al. (2023).

 Hailes & Goodman (2023) point out that the IPV literature frequently alludes to gaslighting, without addressing it by name. Specifically, they write “over 80% of IPV survivors have been called “crazy” by their partners” (Hailes & Goodman, 2023, p. 1). The authors suggests that group therapy may be especially useful for treating survivors of gaslighting, as this will allow survivors to validate each other, helping to reestablish epistemic self-trust (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). The proposed mechanism for recovery is consistent with Sodoma’s (2022) work and Klein et al.’s (2023) finding about the role that socializing plays in recovery.

 The sociologist, Paige Sweet, conducted a large (N = 43) qualitative study on targets of IPV experiences of gaslighting, and how sociological considerations shape these experiences of gaslighting (2019). Sweet argues that gaslighting is rooted in social inequalities, and therefore involves macrolevel social inequalities leading to microlevel instances of abuse. Like Gass and Nichols (1988), Sweet proposes that gaslighting is most effective when making use of culturally endorsed stereotypes, such as women being irrational. She argues that treatments of gaslighting within the psychological literature focus too heavily on dyadic interactions, and therefore miss out on the sociological considerations which enable gaslighting.

Like Hailes & Goodman (2023), Sweet suggests that literature on IPV frequently alludes to gaslighting, without mentioning the phenomenon by name. She views gaslighting as a type of psychological abuse which makes a target feel ‘crazy’ through the creation of ‘surreal’ interpersonal environments. Sweet developed a two-layer framework for gaslighting. First, power inequalities within close relationships cause a surreal environment; second, stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities are used against a target. Sweet suggests that gaslighting is an integral part of IPV. She pays special attention to how gaslighters may use their targets’ institutional vulnerabilities to control them. For example, when gaslighting an African American target a perpetrator may continually threaten to call the police. Mirroring Andrew Spear’s discussion, Sweet believes that gaslighting is inherently dependent on interpersonal trust, and thus views applications of the term to politicians’ interactions with the public as misusing the term.

***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting: Medical Gaslighting***

Building on Sweet, Sebring (2021) discusses the sociological features that result in ‘medical gaslighting’, meaning the ‘invalidation, dismissal, and inadequate care’ of women seeking medical help (pg. 1951). Sebring argues that due to implicit ideologies of positivism, dualism, and colonialism (i.e., macro-level concerns) in health care services ‘bio-others’ (i.e., individuals with socially constructed and marginalized identities), have their experiences routinely denied by the medical community (i.e., micro-level actions). Medical gaslighting has also been discussed in terms of obstetric providers denying the experiences of mothers during the child birthing process, such as denying the mother’s experience of pain (Fielding-Singh & Dmowska, 2022). Through a qualitative analysis of mothers who had experienced traumatic childbirths, it was found that 38 out of 46 women experienced gaslighting at some point during prenatal care, childbirth, or postpartum care.

Echoes of earlier definitions of gaslighting as institutionalization on false pretense can still be observed in the medical gaslighting literature. Recently, gaslighting has been described as a subtype of Malingering Imposed on Another (MIA). MIA is defined as follows: “Falsification of physical or psychologic signs or symptoms, or induction of injury or disease in another, associated with identified deception and the intended benefit of financial remuneration, access to medications, or other secondary gain. Malingering (whether or not it is imposed on another) is not considered a clinical syndrome or diagnosis, though it may occur in the context of another diagnosis (e.g., malingering to get access to opiate pain medication in the setting of an opioid use disorder; pg. 610) (Dumitrascu et al., 2015). Dumitrascu et al. view the medical and psychiatric body of literature on ‘gaslighting’ as being a specific subtype of malingering imposed on another wherein the gaslighter imposes a psychiatric illness on the target to obtain some sort of gain. From our perspective, the earliest psychiatric case studies on gaslighting are best viewed as MIA.

MIA may often involve gaslighting. For example, a malingering perpetrator may require that their target accept their epistemic incompetence or ‘craziness’, at least enough to eventually convince medical professionals of the target’s supposed mental illness. It is quite possible, however, that once medical professionals are convinced that the target is unwell, that the perpetrator may no longer be concerned with the target’s self-perception. Contrastingly, some malingering plots may never require the target to be convinced of their own epistemic incompetence. In fact, cases like this appear in the earliest gaslighting literature, which often involved targets who insisted that they were well. Thus, much of the earliest literature on ‘gaslighting’ may be better understood as MIA and clarifying this terminology may aid both in the understanding of what is meant by gaslighting, as well as aid in the medical community’s ability to identify and report on these sinister plots. We suggest that the term ‘Malingering Imposed on Another’ does refer to a phenomenon related to but distinct from gaslighting.

 Of note, Malingering is similar to, but distinct from Munchausen, and MIA is distinct from Munchausen by Proxy. Munchausen involves an individual feigning illness in order to specifically illicit sympathy. Within the psychiatric literature, Munchausen is distinguished from malingering, which involves feigning illness for some sort of secondary gain, such as medication or money. Similarly, Munchausen by Proxy involves the imposition or exaggeration of illness on another specifically to illicit sympathy for one’s caregiving role, whereas MIA is aimed at more tangible gains.

Medical practitioners, such as nurses, are occasionally discussed as being the targets of gaslighting as well. In particular, ‘whistleblowing’ nurses, who alert their superiors to dangerous or subpar practices are described as being met with resistance, accused of being overtired, and are subtly cued to the fact that continuing to raise alarms about said practices may result in termination. The experience of nurses is a form of institutional betrayal, and is therefore considered a traumatic event (Ahern, 2018). Bullying is a wide-spread issue in nursing, and this bullying sometimes involves gaslighting. For example, when important information is purposefully withheld or nurses providing each other with incorrect or misleading information, or when nurses publicly invalidate each other (Christensen & Evans-Murray, 2021).

Those in caring professions are also sometimes able to interrupt or prevent gaslighting. Riggs and Barholomaeus (2018) discuss how the parents of trans-gender children who claim to be supporting their children’s transition may gaslight their own children when they only act in gender affirming ways in a selective manner. For example, by only allowing their children to wear gender affirming clothing at home. Riggs and Bartholomaeus suggest that clinicians who work with transgender youths may interrupt parental gaslighting by (1) speaking to the children privately, (2) speaking on behalf of children to their parents (3) modelling advocacy to parents (4) correcting misgendering in the clinical context and (5) using peer supervision to discuss cases.

***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting: Racial Gaslighting***

Gaslighting is often discussed in relation to race. Sometimes focusing on how individual gaslighters may use racist stereotypes to induce self-doubt in their targets, in much the same way gender-based stereotypes are used. Sometimes gaslighting is also discussed as a way in which systems of racist thoughts are produced and reinforced at both an individual and societal level, this is often referred to as racial gaslighting or socio-historical gaslighting. Recent publications investigating race and gaslighting are described below.

In 2013 Roberts and Andrew published a chapter entitled “A Critical Race Analysis of the Gaslighting Against African American Teachers” in the book “Contesting the myth of a 'post racial' era: The continued significance of race in U.S.”. This chapter discusses the causes of race-based disparities between black and white schoolteachers in the United States and relies on several theoretical frameworks, namely Critical Race Theory, Narratives-as-Identity, and a psychoanalytic view of gaslighting. The Narratives-as-Identity framework views personal identity as something that is continually reconstructed through narrative, and as such, changes to narratives manifest in changes to the identities of those that narratives are about. When defining and discussing gaslighting Roberts and Andrew draw largely on the psychoanalytic discussions of the phenomenon, touching only briefly on the earlier psychiatric case studies. They provide the following definition of gaslighting:

Gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse where the abuser intentionally manipulates the physical environment or mental state of the abusee, and then deflects responsibility by provoking the abusee to think that the changes reside in their imagination, thus constituting a weakened perception of reality (Akhtar, 2009; Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Dorpat, 1996; Smith & Sinanan, 1972). By repeatedly and convincingly offering explanations that depict the victim as unstable, the abuser can control the victim’s perception of reality while maintaining a position of truth-holder and authority. (pg. 70).

Lastly, Roberts and Andrew’s overall argument relies on a Critical Race Theory lens, which challenges power imbalances and essentialisms through analysis of history and culture.

Roberts and Andrews’ view of gaslighting builds upon earlier psychoanalytic definitions but allows for gaslighting to be a process extended across historical lengths of time. They refer to previous gaslighting studies as describing cases of ‘corporeal gaslighting’ and expand upon this notion by allowing gaslighters and gaslightees to both be large groups, rather than dyads or small groups. This new form of gaslighting is referred to as sociohistorical gaslighting. They go on to argue that a sociohistorical gaslighting campaign has enforced a narrative that views black schoolteachers as inferior to white schoolteachers, thereby leading to the current lack of black schoolteachers in America. They argue that the segregation of the school system in America prior to the civil rights movement enforced the narrative that African American teachers’ professional credentials were ‘questionable’, thereby gaslighting said teachers. They then argue that following constitutional challenges to segregation a second sociohistorical gaslighting campaign was used to reinforce this view of African American schoolteachers as inferior, though this time the gaslightee was the American public in general. Specifically, they view the discrepancy between Nixon’s policy statement on school desegregation and his personal communications regarding his opinion of African American teachers, as well how government funds meant to facilitate desegregation of the school system was used, as a sociohistorical gaslighting campaign. These previously mentioned funds were allocated to programs meant to improve the math and language skills of African American school teachers who had recently lost their job (due to an unwillingness of local school boards to have African American teachers instructing white students), despite explicit statements that African American and White schoolteachers are equally qualified as teachers. Thus, Roberts and Andrews argue that these programs are a gaslighting tactic meant to reinforce the narrative of black schoolteachers as inferior while appearing to be contributing to the process of desegregation. Interestingly, Roberts and Andrew don’t view black schoolteachers as the ‘gaslightee’ in this situation, but rather the object that is manipulated, much like the objects Gregory moves around the house in the 1944 film. Instead, the view the gaslightees as American citizens at large.

Through their definition of sociohistorical gaslighting Roberts and Andrews’ continue to push personal identity to the center stage of the gaslighting narrative. In previous work the aspect of identity most frequently highlighted in gaslighting plots has been gender, and on occasion age, but Robert and Andrews’ highlight race instead. Furthermore, they allow gaslighting to be applied to purely macro-level processes extending beyond the realm of typical psychological definitions of gaslighting.

The concept of racial gaslighting has also been developed within political science (Davis and Ernst, 2019). According to Davis and Ernst, racial gaslighting is a macro-level processes, which consists of and influences micro-level actions. This work builds on Roberts and Andrew’s concept of socio-historical gaslighting, effectively renaming it. Racial gaslighting is defined as “the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist” (Davis and Ernst, 2019; pg. 763). Essential, racial gaslighting, like socio-historical gaslighting, depends on the development and proliferation of particular (racist) narratives, which function to hide the structural inequalities that underlie white supremacy. Within philosophy journals, racial gaslighting has been defined as a subtype of structural gaslighting (Berenstain, 2020). Structural gaslighting involves attempts to obscure the connection between structural oppression and the specific harm done to individuals by that oppression. The connection between macro-level processes and micro-level incidents present in Roberts and Andrew’s notion of socio-historical gaslighting is preserved in the concept of structural gaslighting.

Tobias and Joseph (2020) provide a concrete example of racial gaslighting. They discuss how the police and local media in Hamilton Ontario responded to backlash for *carding*, a practice of systematically racially profiling black individuals. Through their analysis of the Hamilton police departments interaction with the media following these accusations the authors conclude that the police repeatedly shifted their definition of carding and redefined carding as street checks, furthermore in it’s reporting the local media ignored the history of systematic racism in Hamilton, thereby engaging in a form of racial gaslighting.

Occasionally special attention is given to how race is used in dyadic gaslighting. For example, in 2021 two qualitative studies on black women’s experience of gaslighting in academia were published. Grant (2021) suggests that gaslighting is a form of bullying that involves pressuring individuals into questioning the validity of their own perceptions. This is a salient issue for black women in academia, as academic institutions messaging about the importance of the experience of racially marginalized students is at odds with actual efforts of administrators to combat prejudice on campus and within graduate programs. Instead, racially marginalized students are tokenized and used as symbols of a diverse campus life. Grant suggests much of the gaslighting of black academics is due to well-intentioned non-racialized allies, who on the one hand aspire for equitable environment, but on the other hand refuse to acknowledge and adequately address the negative experiences of racialized members of the academic community.

Grant’s (2021) paper describes her own experience in the first term of her formed PhD program. While in the program she did not feel that her perspective as a black woman was respected or acknowledged. After expressing that she was unhappy in the program Grant’s supervisor and another professor accused her of having an identity crisis. They told her she could not leave the program, and that if she did, she would be unable to find a better program. They told her she would face the same issues of not feeling like her experiences as a black woman were respected everywhere else. Thus, she experienced gaslighting, defined as pressuring individuals to question their own perspective, at the hand of academics who want to have a diverse academic environment without hearing and acting on the perspectives of diverse community members.

The second recent paper on the experience of racial gaslighting in academia is based on interviews with 15 women of colour in science, technology, engineer, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Rodrigues et al., 2021). The authors note that efforts to increase the number of women in STEM have been less successful for women of colour. Women of colour in STEM are thus in a position where they are subject to discrimination both because of their gender and their race or ethnicity. Women of colour in academia often experience incivilities (e.g., students or colleagues challenging their methods, materials, and credentials), sexual, and racial harassment. When women of colour speak up about this harassment or incivility their experiences are frequently doubted, minimized, or denied, resulting in a unique form of racial gaslighting. These gaslighting experiences are characterized by the gaslighter having plausible deniability regarding their intentions. This facilitates the confusion and self-doubt that target’s experience. Thus, social support helps contextualize these experiences by reaffirming the women of colours experience and reactions to those experiences, thereby reducing the negative impacts of gaslighting, such as anxiety. Unfortunately, women of colour are often socially isolated in STEM and lack proper support networks. This social isolation fosters an environment where discrimination, gaslighting, and the harmful impact of gaslighting may occur unchecked (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

***Contemporary Work on Gaslighting: Politics***

As noted above, it is likely that the current popularity of the term gaslighting is due, at least in part, to the application of the term to former president Donald Trump’s political tactics. Below we review several papers that describe gaslighting as a political tactic or phenomena.

 Shane, Willaert, and Tuters (2022) draw on Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of conceptual metaphors (i.e., a metaphor that structures debates and thought), and focus on how the use of the term gaslighting (taken to be a conceptual metaphor) structures debates and discourse about American politics. Thus, unlike most work on gaslighting my psychologists they are not interested in inter-personal gaslighting, but rather how the concept of gaslighting impacts political discourse. Through their analysis of usage of the term gaslighting on Twitter and 4chan during the week of the 2020 US presidential election the authors conclude that the metaphorical application of gaslighting to the political context moves discourse away from policy and contributes to paranoia. The authors argue that the usage of the term gaslighting in the political domain is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows for active resistance to attempts to bend and obfuscate the truth; on the other hand accusations of gaslighting are inherently difficult to disprove (e.g., any attempt at denying that gaslighting is occurring is easily labeled to be itself an act of gaslighting) and therefore contributes to the formation of echo-chambers. Shane, Willaert, and Tuters’ suggest that some echo chambers may be epistemically beneficial—especially for marginalized voices—but they acknowledge we are in need of criteria for distinguishing “good echo chambers” from harmful ones. They conclude that a complete understanding of gaslighting must acknowledge both the metaphorical application of the term to political tactics as well as gaslighting as a sociological phenomenon occurring at micro and macro levels.

Other political scientists view gaslighting in terms that are more reminiscent of how psychologists understand the phenomenon. For example, Sinha (2020) defines political gaslighting as, “trafficking in dubious or outright false information about matters of public significance by a politician or political apparatus when the speaker knows or should reasonably know that the information is likely to be incorrect, and the audience has a reasonable basis for doubting the speaker's claims” (pg. 1092). Similar to discussions of interpersonal gaslighting, Sinha views political gaslighting as destabilizing due to the power differentials at play, namely the inherent imbalance of power between politicians and their constituents. Crucially, Sinha suggests that part of the destabilizing effect of political gaslighting is the confusion generated through an inability to believe that a politician would make such easily demonstrably false statements in front of a national audience. The degree to which the audience has reasonable grounds to doubt the gaslighter’s statements, and thus how destabilizing these statements are to listeners, is what differentiates gaslighting from merely lying. Sinha suggests that political and interpersonal gaslighting are similar, but that discussions of either form of gaslighting does not have implications for the other.

Beerbohm and Davis (2021) give the following definition of political gaslighting: “A political actor wrongly induces a group of citizens to limit the exercise of their belief-forming and revising capacities in ways that serve the political ends of the gaslighter, in order to bring about that the group becomes epistemically reliant on the gaslighter” (pg. 4). They argue that the key difference between political and interpersonal gaslighting is that political gaslighting does not aim to have victims’ doubt their own belief forming abilities, but merely to defer to politicians on select issues; more specifically, In contrast to interpersonal gaslighting, political gaslighting can, on occasion, bolster victims’ confidence in their own worldview. Beerbohm and Davis (2021) compare political gaslighting with what they call ‘audacious beliefs’. Audacious beliefs are beliefs that extend beyond the available evidence and are viewed as being crucial to successful grassroots political movements. These audacious beliefs can be at an individual level or a collective level. The authors give the example of a small group of rebels who stand up against imperial forces despite miniscule odds of success an example of individual level audacious beliefs, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s endorsement of non-violence as an example of collective level audacious beliefs. Beerbohm and Davis (2021) express concern that there is little in the way of objective criteria when attempting to distinguish between politicians engaging in gaslighting, and leaders who are attempting to inspire the audacious beliefs which are necessary for positive social change. Beerbohm and Davis’ concern about an inability to distinguish gaslighting from audacious beliefs is reminiscent of Shane, Willaert, and Tuters’ concern regarding a means of distinguishing ‘bad’ echo-chambers from ‘good’ ones.

**Future Directions and Open Questions**

Currently, much more conceptual and empirical work on gaslighting is needed, leaving many open questions for the study of gaslighting. Here we focus on a few. First, should the study of gaslighting focus on the behaviours of the perpetrators, the outcomes and subjective experiences of the target, or both? To date, much of the literature has focused on one party’s experiences at the expense of the other. Deciding which aspects are most relevant to gaslighting raises challenging questions.When defining gaslighting, researchers must decide what should be given priority: a set of actions perpetrated by the gaslighter (i.e., gaslighting), subjective reports of having one’s reality undermined (i.e., being gaslit), or some combination of the two. As gaslighting depends on the perpetrator maintaining plausible deniability through subtle manipulations, focusing exclusively on the actions of gaslighters runs the risk of missing the most severe cases of abuse. On the other hand, focusing exclusively on subjective reports from self-proclaimed survivors of gaslighting may cast too wide a net, potentially resulting in innocent individuals being labelled as gaslighters. It does seem possible that some interactions may leave individuals doubting their own epistemic competence without having been gaslit. Cases wherein a person’s legitimate epistemic incompetence is brought up, reasonable disagreements between highly sensitive individuals, and disagreements between individuals firmly committed to opposing and incompatible subjective perspectives are just a few examples of situations in which one may feel gaslit, without gaslighting having taken place.

Another unresolved question in the literature is whether gaslighting must be perpetrated consciously. The earliest descriptions of gaslighting all involved deliberate and conscious acts on the part of the perpetrator, whereas later psychodynamic perspectives on gaslighting allowed it to be perpetrated unconsciously (e.g., Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Calef & Weinshel, 1981). Most contemporary research suggests gaslighting can sometimes be perpetrated unconsciously (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Zembylas, 2024), though some point out that paradigmatic gaslighting is perpetrated consciously (Sodoma, 2022). While the gaslighter’s self-awareness matters less for researchers focused exclusively on the reports of gaslighting survivors, it is of crucial importance for researchers focused on gaslighters, themselves.

There are several theoretical and practical issues to be addressed if researchers insist that gaslighting must be perpetrated consciously; here we identify two. To begin with, it seems consistent with the perpetrators’ *modus operandi* to deny that they are purposefully and consciously engaging in gaslighting. Without direct access to the perpetrator’s thoughts and experiences, establishing that gaslighting is perpetrated consciously would be quite difficult. Further, gaslighting is sometimes used to describe how socio-cultural systems of oppression reinforce themselves. Individuals occupying a privileged epistemic position internalize stereotypes about marginalized others and subsequently devalue, ignore, and doubt marginalized others’ testimonies, leading those others to feel epistemically incompetent (Zembylas, 2024). While this is no excuse for the moral harm done in these cases of gaslighting, it seems possible, even likely, that these cases are often unconscious. Thus, insisting that gaslighting is perpetrated consciously may require the abandonment or refinement of this conceptualization of gaslighting.

Finally, researchers ought to ask themselves, what in our current cultural moment is influencing the definition and understanding of gaslighting and why is it having such a moment in the Western world? There exist many possibilities. Most obvious is the application of the term to the rhetorical strategies of high-profile politicians (e.g., Dominus, 2016; Ghitis, 2017; Nast, 2016). Relatedly, in recent years, trust in traditional authoritative sources of information has been in the decline (e.g., government, news media, scientists, and academics; Dalton, 2005; Kennedy et al., 2022). Another possibility is that the recent Me Too movement has successfully increased public awareness about the prevalence of interpersonal abuse, including formerly unnoticed types of abuse (i.e., gaslighting). Finally, another possibility is that recent advances in information technology, and the consequential increase in access to (and ability to produce and disseminate) information has proliferated incompatible worldviews, resulting in more awareness and interest in these epistemological aspects of social life. These various elements of our changing epistemic climate may not only be creating more opportunities for gaslighting, but also increasing public interest in the epistemic elements of interpersonal relationships more broadly, including interest in gaslighting. The increasing public interest, as well as legislative interest (e.g., Serious Crimes Act, 2015) in gaslighting reflects the importance of more widespread and rigorous research on the topic.

 In sum, reflecting upon critical, open questions in gaslighting research, we recommend:

1. Moving forward, wherever possible, researchers studying gaslighting should focus both on specific gaslighting behaviours and the reported subjective effects of these behaviours on survivors.
2. In addition to studying the personality traits associated with gaslighting, researchers should assess the motivations and level of self-awareness of gaslighters.
3. Researchers should rigorously investigate the cultural factors influencing today’s understanding of gaslighting to clarify the causes of its current popularity in the Western world.

**Conclusions**

Throughout its history, definitions of gaslighting have shifted from describing a highly specific, pathologically manipulative overt behaviour, towards focusing on internal psychological states of both the target and gaslighter. As definitions of gaslighting became more psychological in nature, theory has focused on who, through their relative social standing, may be able to leverage epistemic privilege, and who, due to their level of marginalization, may be more epistemically subjugated. The recent surge of interest in gaslighting is no doubt due, at least in part, to recent events wherein individuals have abused the epistemic authority that comes with public positions of power. Yet, the intellectual history of gaslighting indicates that it is by no means a new phenomenon; it is only the public awareness of this tactic that has changed.

Gaslighting was first described over 80 years ago and was identified in the psychiatric and psychological literature over 50 years ago. How gaslighting is conceptualized has undergone considerable theoretical development, yet quantitative research on the topic remains scant. Recent empirical work has begun to test assumptions in the theoretical literature about who is likely to perpetrate or be a target of gaslighting, as well as better document the typical course of gaslighting in close relationships.

Despite the relatively small body of work on the topic, contemporary research is converging on several core aspects of gaslighting. Today, the study of gaslighting primarily focuses on repeated, micro-level interactions meant to undermine the target. The undermining element of these interactions also must have some degree of plausible deniability. These interactions may undermine a target’s epistemic abilities (e.g., knowledge of self, knowledge of the world) or cognitive abilities (e.g., memory, intelligence). The relationship between the gaslighter and target is also important; it must involve epistemic trust which may be derived through intimacy (e.g., in romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, or friendships) or authority (e.g., therapist-client relationships, doctor-patient relationships). Theory and empirical work are converging on the subjective effects of gaslighting on the target: gaslighting results in self-doubt, confusion, and a contraction of one’s sense of self. Theorists and empirical researchers are also converging on mechanisms for overcoming gaslighting, focusing especially on interacting with non-abusive close others or participating in group-therapy to reset one’s faith in one’s own epistemic abilities. It is our hope that the current work will help contextualize and clarify the phenomenon of gaslighting, thereby facilitating further research efforts.

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**Tables and Figures**

Table 1. *Empirical Peer-Reviewed Articles on Gaslighting*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Article** | **Gaslighting Type**  | **Data Type** | **Key Takeaways**  |
| Barton & Whitehead (1969) | Institutionalization | Case Study | The authors suggest that accusations of insanity could lead citizens to be unjustly institutionalized as a means of resolving family issues. Gaslighting is described as a conscious, manipulative attempt to have a mentally-well individual institutionalized on false pretenses for financial, emotional, or personal gain. |
| Smith & Sinanan (1972) | Institutionalization | Case Study | A gaslighter attempted to have a victim institutionalized in a general hospital, rather than a psychiatric hospital. |
| Lund & Gardiner (1977) | Institutionalization | Case Study | Gaslighting is perpetrated by workers at the victim’s care-home, rather than by a close-other. |
| Sheikh (1979) | Institutionalization | Case Study | The perpetrators convince an elderly relative to move into their flat, once this has occurred, they try to convince a physician that their elderly relative has dementia, and thus should forfeit control of their finances. |
| Calef & Weinshel (1981) | Psychodynamic  | Case Study | The first discussion of potential mechanisms underlying gaslighting perpetration and its effects on victims. The author’s apply psychodynamic theory to four case studies. |
| Kutcher (1982) | Psychodynamic | Case Study | The author argues that the term gaslighting has been extended too far beyond its original definition. He then describes two case studies that he views as being appropriate to describe as gaslighting.  |
| Cawthra et al. (1987) | Psychodynamic  | Case Study | The authors describe a case where the gaslighter is not acting out of malice. |
| Gass & Nichols (1988) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Insights from clinical practice (Anonymized) | Husbands resort to gaslighting to avoid accountability for adultery. The authors outline victims’ reactions, perpetrators’ rationalizations, and the role that sexist stereotypes play in gaslighting. |
| Bashford & Leschziner. (2015) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Case Study | Much like the earliest works on gaslighting, the aim of this paper is to bring awareness of gaslighting to medical professionals. |
| Riggs & Bartholomaeus (2018) | Close Other (Parent-Child) | Insights from clinical practice (Anonymized / Composite) | The authors discuss how parents of transgender children gaslight their children.  |
| Sweet (2019) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Qualitative | Qualitative studies on gaslighting of survivors of IPV. These studies focus on the sociological, rather than psychological features of gaslighting, specifically social inequality.  |
| Tormoen (2019) | Student-Teacher | Autoethnography | A first person narrative describing the author’s experience of being gaslight by a university professor. |
| Sebring (2021) | Medical Gaslighting  | Qualitative | Qualitative study on mothers who experienced traumatic childbirth. Study found that 38 out of 46 women experienced gaslighting at some point during prenatal care, childbirth, or postpartum care. |
| Grant (2021) | Workplace Relationship | Auto-ethnography | A first person narrative describing the author’s experience of racial gaslighting in the first year of her PhD program.  |
| Rodrigues et al. (2021) | Workplace Relationship | Qualitative | Qualitative study of 15 women of color in STEM, assessing experiences of racial gaslighting in academia.  |
| Graves & Samp (2021) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Quantitative  | Quantitative investigation of the relationship between dependence power and the perpetration of gaslighting. |
| Miano et al. (2021) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Quantitative | Quantitative investigation of personality domains of abusers and survivors of gaslighting using the PID-5-IRF and PID-5-BF. |
| Au et al. (2022) | Medical Gaslighting | Quantitative | Qualitative study on the experience of long-covid patients who have been gaslighted by physicians. |
| Chauhan et al. (2022) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Case Study | A woman is coerced into injuring her hands and feet by her husband in an attempt to attain primary, secondary, and tertiary gains.  |
| Fielding-Singh & Dmowska (2022) | Medical Gaslighting | Qualitative | Qualitative analysis of how obstetric providers gaslight mothers by denying their reality, experiences, and pain.  |
| Hailes & Goodman (2023) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Qualitative | Qualitative study of survivors of gasligting and IPV.  |
| Klein et al. (2023) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Qualitative | Qualitative study on gaslighting in romantic relationships. This study organizes the time course of gaslighting relationships and their psychological consequences for victims into a model. |
| Kukreja & Pandey (2023) | Workplace Relationships | Quantitative  | The authors develop and validate a scale meant to measure workplace gaslighting.  |
| March et al. (2023) | Close Others (Romantic Relationships) | Quantitative | Quantitative investigation of the relationship between personality traits (specifically Dark Tetrad traits) and endorsing the use of gaslighting tactics in romantic relationships. |

*Legend.* Empirical work on gaslighting consists of case studies, quantitative, and qualitative research. This table highlights key takeaways of empirical work on gaslighting from 1969-2023 and identifies the (a) type of data used and (b) context in which gaslighting occurred for each study. Note that not all articles listed in the table are discussed in depth in the paper, but are included herein to create a comprehensive reference.



Figure 1. *Dorpat’s Taxonomy of Terms*

Dorpat situates gaslighting within a taxonomy of terms; control and manipulation is the superordinate category; within this category are indoctrination methods and within indoctrination methods are covert methods of interpersonal control, which is the focus of his book. He views gaslighting as a type of projective identification, which is a method of covert control. In addition to projective identification, Dorpat describes several other methods of interpersonal control which are common in therapy, for example, questioning (especially repetitive or directive questioning), and psychoanalytic defense interpretations such as confrontations, interrupting, and abrupt changes in topics.

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Figure 2. *Google Trends Data for Gaslighting*

This graph represents the relative search interest for the term gaslighting. A score of 100 represents peak interests (i.e., peak number of google searches). In January 2016, as Trump’s election campaign is in full swing there is a score of 5. From 2016 onward, interest in the term steadily grows, peaking in December 2022. This graph was generated on March 3rd, 2023.



Figure 3. *Peer Reviewed Publications on Gaslighting*

Following 2016 there has been a steep rise in the yearly number of peer reviewed articles on the topic of gaslighting.

1. Note. Two of three authors of the present work were also authors on this qualitative study. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)