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Understanding Workplace Gaslighting: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract

This narrative literature review examines gaslighting and emotional manipulation in the workplace. It explores definitions of gaslighting and its manifestations affecting individuals and organizations, along with approaches to preventing it. It discusses 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 the literature. This study aims to clarify the destructive character of gaslighting and emotional manipulation in the workplace and offers solutions for coping with it 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 increasingly turned their attention to insider forms of interpersonal behavior that can create toxic work environments (Darke et al., 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 distort events, shift blame to make the employee doubt their judgment, or minimize their feelings (Hussain et al., 2020). Emotional manipulation overlaps with gaslighting as a term, but it carries a wider spectrum of tactics to use to influence or control another person's emotions for personal gain or advantage. At the same time, gaslighting overlaps with similar abuses such as manipulation, brainwashing, and bullying and is debated as a construct (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). This review defines workplace gaslighting, distinguishes it from bullying and abusive supervision, explains the mechanisms driving it, and outlines organizational responses. Throughout, this review argues that gaslighting is hard to address because it hides inside normal workplace behavior, especially the fact that everyday interactions leave no written proof. Because the tactic depends on this deniability, interventions aimed only at individuals will fail, and the structural conditions that make manipulation deniable must change.

Methodology

This paper presents a narrative literature review of gaslighting and emotional manipulation in organizational contexts. A search was conducted across PsycINFO and PubMed from December 2024 to March 2025, supplemented by backward citation tracking. 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. 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 38 were included based on quality assessment. This review only uses English-language publications, so perspectives from non-English researchers may not be fully represented. Although both face-to-face and digital studies reflect

the changing reality of the modern workplace, the field is still developing. Empirical work on digital gaslighting in particular is only beginning to gain recognition. Limitations include reliance on English-language sources and the frequent use of bullying or abusive supervision studies as proxies for gaslighting.

Literature Review

History of Gaslighting

The term gaslighting originated from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play Gaslight and its film adaptations in 1940 and 1944, 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 et al., 2026). The play is culturally significant because its name 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 Barton and Whitehead's Lancet article, "The Gas-Light Phenomenon" (1969), which talked about how hospital staff accepted false histories from families to have patients certified (Barton & Whitehead, 1969). In the 1970s, case reports created a wider perspective on this, since documented cases of elderly patients in hospitals and care homes being gaslighted by caretakers showed that gaslighting was not limited to family members (as reviewed in Klein et al., 2026).

In the 1980s, scholars worked on figuring out the psychological mechanisms rather than the institutional aspects. Calef and Weinshel (1981) described gaslighting as a consequence of projective identification, where the aggressor pushes unwanted parts of themselves onto the victim, which destabilizes the victim's self-trust. Later, Gass and Nichols (1988) identified patterns in which unfaithful husbands deflected blame by labeling their wives irrational. After that, a wider psychoanalytic perspective describes gaslighting as a hidden means of controlling a person's emotions by denying their emotional reality (Dorpat, 1994).

Gaslighting became a widely known term with Stern's book "The Gaslight Effect" (2007), because it talked about perpetrator 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., 2026). Over time, this concept became a phrase to explain manipulation across different settings, such as relationships, workplaces, and institutions.

Table 1 summarizes key milestones in the conceptual history of gaslighting.

Table 1. Milestones in the Conceptual History of Gaslighting

Date	Contributions	Context
1938–1944	The term *Gaslight* play and films popularized the term	A husband manipulates his wife by dimming the lights, which became a cultural metaphor.
1969	First academic description of *The Gas-Light Phenomenon*	Hospital staff accepted false family histories to have patients certified.
1970s	Case reports broaden perspective	Caretakers and staff gaslighted elderly patients in hospitals and care homes.
1980s	Shift to psychological mechanisms	Shift from institutional to psychological focus
2007	Stern's The Gaslight Effect reaches mainstream	Described perpetrator types and showed that gaslighting thrives on victims' need for validation
2022	Merriam-Webster "Word of the Year"	The designation gave mainstream recognition in both the digital and organizational contexts.

Understanding gaslighting in the workplace

Workplace gaslighting consists of small manipulations that distort the victim's perception of reality to make them second-guess their actions and abilities (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). For example, a supervisor 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 a sense of being unappreciated when no documentation exists to verify the work (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). This shows that toxic co-workers deliberately discredit and harm their colleagues, creating a work environment that's hostile and untrustworthy. Exact prevalence of workplace gaslighting is unknown, since no representative study exists. Kukreja and Pandey (2023) measured frequency in samples but did not estimate workforce-wide rates. The closest proxy is workplace bullying, where meta-analytic estimates place global prevalence between 11 and 18 percent depending on the measurement method (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Since gaslighting is harder to detect than direct bullying, its true rates are likely underestimated in any survey. In domestic violence contexts, 73.8% of callers reported partners making them feel "crazy" (Sweet, 2019), suggesting reality-denial is common where power imbalances exist. Environments where such manipulation occurs are associated with mental health issues such as anxiety and diminished confidence (Hansen et al., 2006). These conditions can foster social isolation and long-term psychological trauma analogous to documented outcomes of workplace bullying (Hansen et al., 2006). Intense gaslighting can cause self-doubt to the point that the individual comes to believe the gaslighter's manipulative narrative, making it difficult for the victim to connect with or understand their actual experiences—a dynamic observed in intimate partner violence and potentially analogous in workplace settings (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 shows 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 et al., 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	(Sweet, 2019; Kukreja & Pandey, 2023)

Psychological Mechanisms of Gaslighting and Emotional Manipulation

To understand how manipulation works, an individual must know its psychological and structural mechanisms. Perpetrators often display the traits Paulhus and Williams (2002) called the "Dark Triad.” Klein et al. (2026) frame gaslighting as a learning process driven by two features: the perpetrator's attempts to convince the target that they are epistemically incompetent, and the target's trust in the perpetrator. Within their prediction error framework, the gaslighter creates expectation violations, then offers explanations that blame the target's judgment. Targets accept these explanations to preserve the relationship. Repeated cycles erode agency and deepen dependency. Recent studies link gaslighting to specific traits. March et al. (2025) found that psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism predicted endorsing gaslighting, but not narcissism. Miano et al. (2021) found gaslighters scored higher on disinhibition and antagonism. These findings support the trait account, though samples were young adults. 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, as suggested by practitioner accounts (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000; Duffy & Sperry, 2014). However, these two theoretical accounts pull in different directions. Klein et al. (2026) locate the mechanism in ordinary social cognition: anyone who trusts the wrong person can be targeted, because gaslighting works by exploiting a normal learning process. Sweet (2019) instead locates gaslighting in structural

inequality, arguing that it serves to maintain social hierarchies. Both agree that victim personality is not the cause, but they disagree on what follows. If Klein et al. are right, gaslighting can occur anywhere trust exists, and organizations should address the trust conditions themselves, such as unverifiable claims. If Sweet is right, gaslighting concentrates where power imbalances concentrate, and organizations should address hierarchy first. The workplace evidence reviewed here supports both readings in part. Bullying research shows that laissez-faire leadership predicts mistreatment (Hauge et al., 2007), which backs Sweet's structural emphasis, while the mechanism Klein et al. describe explains why structural fixes alone are not enough, since the tactic survives wherever normal trust can be exploited. Consequently, social influence and hierarchical structures play a critical role in enabling these 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 workplace bullying is experienced at lower rates when organizations maintain strong ethical climates and accountability structures (Vilas-Boas, 2019).

Effects on Individuals and Organizations

Gaslighting and emotional manipulation are strongly associated with poor mental health outcomes. In the bullying literature, which provides the closest proxy evidence, meta-analytic estimates across more than 77,000 workers show associations with mental health problems (r = .34) and post-traumatic stress symptoms (r = .37), the strongest of all measured outcomes (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Longitudinal data show bullied workers have roughly 2.3 times the odds of developing mental health problems over time. Returning to the supervisor who denies the completed task: the employee in that scenario cannot prove the work was done, cannot prove the denial is intentional, and gradually stops trusting their own record of events. People who have this experience often deal with anxiety and diminished confidence, and their professional performance can decrease because persistent self-doubt undermines productivity and creativity (Ciabatti et al., 2025). However, meta-analytic data suggests that measured performance often remains stable, as targets strive to prove their competence (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). This causes social withdrawal: victims avoid workplace interactions and become more isolated. Abusive supervision has also been associated with higher turnover intentions and lower job satisfaction (Hussain et al., 2020), along with conflict between work and home life. The effects of manipulation also reach the entire organization. In the bullying meta-analysis, exposure was associated with intent to leave (r = .28), lower job satisfaction (r = -.22), and weaker organizational commitment (r = -.19) (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Interestingly, absenteeism and measured performance showed only weak or non-significant associations, possibly because targets keep showing up to work to avoid being labeled as malingerers (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). This means the damage is psychological first and organizational second, flowing through the person rather than the attendance sheet. Toxicity could still result in financial losses and lower productivity (Anjum et al., 2018), while potentially leading to reputational damage and legal costs.

Table 3 summarizes the types of outcomes and their effects on individuals and the workplace.

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

Outcome Type	Effect	Evidence
Mental Health	Associated with mental health problems (r = .34) and PTSD symptoms (r = .37)	(Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012)
Longitudinal risk	2.3× odds of later mental health problems	(Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012)
Job Attitudes	Intent to leave (r = .28), job satisfaction (r = -.22)	(Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012)
Social Interaction	Withdrawal and isolation	(Hansen et al., 2006)
Performance	Weak or non-significant direct effect	(Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012)
Organizational	Teamwork and trust decline; financial losses	(Anjum et al., 2018)

Cultural and Organizational Factors

Some cultures are more conducive 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 (Hauge et al., 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 section explains how manipulation can occur in each context by showing how power and control can be exploited in both in-person and digital contexts.

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. While the evidence base is dominated by bullying research, these same mechanisms of power imbalance and stigma apply to face-to-face gaslighting, where the lack of digital records makes the manipulation harder to prove. 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 et al., 2021). Some survey research suggests that a substantial proportion of employees experience workplace harassment during their careers, highlighting the 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—tactics often discussed in the context of digital workplace abuse (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.

Discussion

Workplace gaslighting is a pattern of behavior that produces both interpersonal harm and organizational failure. Studies suggest that manipulation is easier to sustain in workplaces that lack accountability, transparency, and clear reporting structures, and research on transparency in hierarchies shows that information asymmetry shapes how people behave within them (Hofmann & Indjejikian, 2024). The findings in this review show that gaslighting is hard to detect because of its manipulative character. The evidence also suggests a self-reinforcing cycle: bullying longitudinally predicts later mental health problems, and mental health problems predict later exposure to bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). This mirrors Klein et al.'s (2026) claim that anyone can become a target, since being harmed raises the risk of being harmed again. This difficulty of detection 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 suggests that leadership styles characterized by emotional intelligence or transformational qualities may serve as protective factors (Hauge et al., 2007). Therefore, organizational strategies should ensure transparent communication, establish psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999), and maintain confidential reporting systems, thereby reducing the likelihood of abuse. 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). Of the interventions reviewed, documentation appears most promising, more so than training. Training teaches employees to recognize manipulation, but recognition does not remove the manipulator's deniability, and the tactic continues as long as claims cannot be proven. Documentation works differently: written task assignments and feedback records do not require anyone to diagnose manipulation, they remove the ambiguity the tactic needs. When workplace decisions leave a record, gaslighting becomes difficult to carry out regardless of who holds power. This points to an implication of the review worth stating directly: workplaces built on informal, undocumented communication are the most vulnerable, and fixing that is an organizational problem before it is a psychological one.

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. Leadership should undergo upward evaluation, and leaders should receive training and support to prevent the development of toxic leadership dynamics (Fahie, 2020). Victims should keep a detailed record of the manipulative interactions to support their cases when they report them. In the supervisor scenario above, the employee's position was weak precisely because no documentation existed; a contemporaneous record of task assignments and completions removes the deniability the tactic depends on. Organizations need training programs that reduce vulnerability and build assertiveness, teaching employees how to set boundaries and communicate effectively. 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 Prevention and Intervention

The study "How passive and active bystanders in the group moderate the effects of bullying exposure" (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 dynamic helps explain the prevalence of passive responses. 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 effect (van Heugten, 2010). For example, van Heugten (2010) reported that supportive interactions appeared to strengthen victims' confidence. Nickerson et al. (2014) state that training programs can improve bystander awareness. This research indicates 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). Coercive control laws in England and Wales (2015), Scotland (2018), and Ireland (2019) criminalize these manipulation patterns, and Sweet (2019) notes hundreds of charges under the 2015 law, signaling a shift toward recognizing psychological manipulation as harm. For example, in "Workplace gaslighting: Conceptualization, development, and validation of a scale" (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023), the authors state that "Gaslighting should be differentiated from other harmful behaviors such as manipulation, lying, disagreement, guilt-tripping, stonewalling, ghosting, bullying, brainwashing, blackmailing, and name-calling" to clarify the distinction 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). Furthermore, the failure to address such manipulation constitutes a form of institutional betrayal, which can compound the trauma experienced by victims who attempt to report these behaviors (Ahern, 2018). 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 et al., 2025). Consequently, clear guardrails for AI tools in the workplace are essential, given that transparency and employee consent are crucial requirements for a healthy work environment.

Future Directions

This review suggests that organizational gaslighting is conceptually connected to bullying, abuse, abusive supervision, and manipulation, though existing measures remain limited in scope. Therefore, future research should focus on the following areas. The Gaslighting at Work Questionnaire (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023) is a validated 12-item scale. However, it was developed on Indian and US online samples, focuses only on supervisor-to-subordinate dynamics, and used short time lags. It does not yet capture peer gaslighting or long-term outcomes.

1. Clarity and measurement.

Scholarship should focus on expanding and improving cross-validating existing instruments. Such instruments could separate gaslighting from overlapping constructs 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 so that tactics such as selective timestamp manipulation, deleting messages, and intentional delays are systematically investigated. To take things further, tools such as keeping digital trace data and collaboration platforms should be used to detect gaslighting.

3. Multilevel interventions.

Interventions must operate at multiple levels. At the individual level, employees need training on setting boundaries and recognizing manipulation. At the team level, fostering psychological safety and active bystander behavior can disrupt cycles of abuse. At the organizational level, clear policies, transparent reporting systems, and leadership accountability are required to prevent toxic cultures from taking root.

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 litigation costs should be included in this analysis.

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.

6. Gender patterns.

Sweet (2019) argues gaslighting exploits gender stereotypes linking femininity to irrationality. Quantitative tests of these patterns in workplaces are still needed.

Conclusion

At first glance, gaslighting might not look like a significant issue, but it seriously damages workplace dynamics. Gaslighting damages both individuals and organizations by causing profound uncertainty in perception, eroding mental health, and disrupting workplace functioning. 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. Research on perpetrator traits suggests that individuals displaying manipulative characteristics such as the Dark Triad may be more likely to exploit others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), though the extent to which victim personality predicts targeting remains contested (Sweet, 2019). From an organizational perspective, this could lead to weaker accountability, blurred 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 of this problem 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 intervene, reducing the isolation victims often face (Ng et al., 2021; van Heugten, 2010).

In conclusion, a workplace where gaslighting is not 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 foster collaboration and a healthy work environment.

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