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“THEY’RE OUT TO TAKE AWAY YOUR SANITY”:  
AN ECOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF GASLIGHTING  
IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Dissertation

By

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## Abstract

“THEY’RE OUT TO TAKE AWAY YOUR SANITY”:  
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IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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The term “gaslighting” has become increasingly ubiquitous in popular media, from self-help literature to political analysis (Carpenter, 2018; Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2018). It is also beginning to gain traction in the medical and mental health establishment. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now includes gaslighting under its definition of psychological aggression (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). However, empirical research on this topic lags behind popular discourse. There is desperate need for definition clarity and empirical evidence of this uniquely epistemic form of harm, otherwise the term gaslighting runs the risk of becoming vague, diffuse, and almost meaninglessness.

Gaslighting in intimate partner violence (IPV) is the original and paradigmatic case of gaslighting (Cukor, 1944; Hamilton, 2015). A small handful of recent studies have investigated gaslighting in this context, and more general psychological abuse literature has hinted at it by other names (e.g. Bhatti et al., 2021; Ferraro, 2006; Sweet, 2019; Tolman, 1992). However, the present study represents the first systematic, empirical, psychological investigation of gaslighting in IPV. Study aims were to illuminate the tactics, effects, and long-term implications of gaslighting in IPV, as well as ecological factors that may influence survivor experiences.

Fifteen IPV survivors were interviewed about their gaslighting experiences, and data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods. Three clusters of findings emerged:

Survivors described (1) the gaslighting process, (2) their long-term responses to gaslighting, and (3) the influence of ecological factors on self-trust. This study represents a substantial advancement in the literature on gaslighting in IPV, demonstrating the validity of a new two-part model of gaslighting, describing survivors' subjective experiences of self-doubt, and illuminating how gaslighting fits into broader patterns of power and control in IPV. It also provides the first account of what survivor resistance to gaslighting might look like, and how other factors in survivors' lives may hinder or promote resistance. Implications for research and practice are discussed in the context of study limitations.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We live in a unique moment in U.S. history, where fresh epistemic issues are in the news every day: Sexual assault survivors are coming forward to describe stories of being unheard or disbelieved, sometimes causing them to doubt their own experience (e.g. Kitchener, 2018); Subtle, everyday forms of racial oppression (microaggressions) are regularly denied and dismissed (e.g. DeAngelis, 2009); “Fake news” and “deep fakes” undermine our ability to trust news media and even our own eyes (e.g. Toews, 2020); World leaders lie with impunity about undeniable truths, eroding our sense of what it is to “know” something (e.g. Garber, 2019).

In this particular historical moment, when the question of whose stories are trustworthy is at the forefront, it is no wonder that the term “gaslighting” has become a popular buzzword in self-help books and popular culture (Carpenter, 2018; Churchwell, 2018; Fett, 2015; Sarkis, 2018; Waldman, 2016) or that the Oxford Dictionaries recently named it a contender for word of the year (Stanley-Becker, 2018). Gaslighting refers to a specific form of abuse where one person manipulates another person – often, though not always verbally – causing them to doubt their own fundamental memories, perceptions, or beliefs (Spear, 2019). Gaslighting has been anecdotally documented within families (Westover, 2018), in the context of therapy (Elise, 2015), and even in the political sphere (Carpenter, 2018).

Perhaps the clearest and most dramatic form of gaslighting occurs in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Over 80% of IPV survivors have been called “crazy” by their partners (Warshaw, Lyon, Philips, Bland, & Hooper, 2014), and there is some evidence that the experience of being made to feel “crazy” or to doubt oneself is central to a harming partner’s ability to maintain power and control over an IPV survivor (Loring, 1994; Tolman, 1992). While the term gaslighting arises occasionally in IPV scholarly literature or is alluded to by other

names (e.g. Burnett, 2020; Ferraro, 2006; Hightower, 2017; Lammers, Ritchie, & Robertson, 2005; Sweet, 2019), no psychological study to-date has systematically and rigorously studied its dynamics. Through interviews with IPV survivors, this study aims to illuminate the mechanisms and impacts of gaslighting in the context of partner violence, described further below. The following introductory chapter provides a framework by introducing gaslighting as a case study of epistemic injustice, reviewing a brief history and definition of gaslighting, and situating it within the context of ecological systems theory.

### **Epistemic Injustice**

Philosopher Miranda Fricker, who coined the term epistemic injustice and remains the most prominent theorist on the subject, defines it as a specific kind of injustice, “in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower” (Fricker, 2007, p. 20). Fricker outlines two primary forms of epistemic injustice: Testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Testimonial injustice occurs when a listener unfairly disbelieves or discredits a speaker, perhaps due to harmful stereotypes or preconceptions they may hold about the speaker. Testimonial injustice is often the product of prejudice and inequitable power dynamics, such that people with certain social identities are more likely to be believed than others. Hermeneutic injustice, on the other hand, occurs when someone finds themselves unable to fully understand or describe their experience because society’s collective conceptual frameworks fail to provide adequate concepts or language. For instance, before the concept of domestic violence entered popular discourse, women who were beaten up by their husbands may have experienced not only the physical harm of the assault but also the hermeneutic harm of being unable to conceptualize or communicate their experiences (Fricker, 2007).

Because gaslighting targets an individual's trust in their own memories, perceptions, and core beliefs – their ability to know– it can be considered a form of epistemic injustice (Abramson, 2014; Spear, 2019). Abramson (2014) argues that gaslighting, though similar to testimonial injustice, goes beyond it: While testimonial injustice involves discrediting or disbelief, gaslighting obliterates even the possibility of testimonial injustice by rendering the gaslightee incapable of even mounting a discreditable challenge or disagreement, such that “Successful gaslighting... might aptly be thought of as a kind of existential silencing” (Abramson, 2014, pp. 17-18). Andrew Spear (2019) refers to the fundamental belief that one's mental abilities are functioning and generally able to make accurate inferences about the world as “epistemic self-trust,” and, this paper will refer to its absence as “epistemic self-doubt” ( or “self-trust” and “self-doubt,” for short.) These philosophical accounts suggest that gaslighting is a particularly grave form of epistemic injustice, whereby the gaslightee is not only discredited by others but fundamentally loses the ability to credit their *own* experiences of the world. To better understand gaslighting, we turn now to the origins and history of the concept.

### **History of Gaslighting**

The term gaslighting can be traced back to the 1938 play *Gaslight* by British dramatist Patrick Hamilton, which was later adapted into the popular 1944 film by the same name, starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer (Cukor, 1944; Hamilton, 2015). In the film, Boyer plays an international criminal who tricks Bergman into marrying him and gradually convinces her that she is losing her mind as a tactic for controlling her, so he can search undisturbed for (and ultimately inherit) the family jewels hidden in her attic. He slowly chips away at her sense of self-trust by hiding things and convincing her that she lost them and by telling others that she is unstable and unwell, so that they unwittingly collude in his manipulation. Every night, when

Boyer's character sneaks to the attic to search for the jewels, the gaslights in the house flicker, as he turns on the attic lights. Unaware of his deception, Bergman's character begins to believe that she is imagining the flicker of the gaslights because her basic sensory perception has become unreliable. Thus, the concept of gaslighting came into being: "A match struck; a metaphor flickered to life. *Gas Light* reminded viewers how uniquely terrifying it can be to mistrust the evidence of your senses" (Waldman, 2016).

The concept of gaslighting has appeared occasionally in psychological case studies since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century but did not gain traction in the popular lexicon until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the early case studies, gaslighting primarily referred to instances where a woman was hospitalized for mental illness by her husband, only for it to be later revealed that the husband had deliberately and wrongly convinced her that she was mentally ill (Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Gass & Nichols, 1988; C. G. Smith & Sinanan, 1972). Case studies also described gaslighting in the context of elderly care homes and within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (Dorpat, 1994; Lund & Gardiner, 1977). Psychoanalysts conceptualized gaslighting as a form of projective identification, in which the gaslighter seeks to avoid their own anxiety and lost sense of reality by projecting these onto the gaslightee, who internalizes or introjects them (Calef & Weinshel, 1981).

Robin Stern's popular (2007) self-help book, *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life* brought the term gaslighting out of psychotherapy journals and into popular discourse. In the second edition of the book, Stern refers to gaslighting as "an idea whose time has come" (Stern, 2018, p. XIX) and explains that gaslighting "results from a relationship between two people: a gaslighter, who needs to be right in order to preserve his own sense of self and his sense of having power in the world; and a

gaslightee, who allows the gaslighter to define her sense of reality because she idealizes him and seeks his approval” (Stern, 2018, p. 3). Since then, gaslighting has been the subject of further self-help and pop-psychology literature (e.g. Fett, 2015; Sarkis, 2018), popular memoirs (Leve, 2017; Machado, 2019; Westover, 2018), and Trump-era political discourse (Carpenter, 2018; Waldman, 2016). While they have popularized the concept of gaslighting, these genres of literature are not grounded in rigorous empirical research and sometimes suffer from lack of precision and clarity around what gaslighting *actually is*. Despite the growing proliferation of popular gaslighting literature, scholarly work on the subject remains thin.

### **Defining Gaslighting**

One of the shortcomings of the non-academic gaslighting literature has been the relatively loose definition of gaslighting, for instance conflating it with derision or discrediting (e.g. Churchwell, 2018) or defining it broadly enough to include most forms of psychological abuse (e.g. Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2018). To distinguish gaslighting from other forms of testimonial injustice or other forms of abuse, and consistent with conceptualizations of the broader construct of psychological abuse, which has previously been defined in terms of a combination of *both* behavior and impact (Chang, 1996; Lammers et al., 2005; Loring, 1994; O’Leary, 1999; Tolman, 1992), this study proposes a two-part model of gaslighting: (a) The harming partner directly and repeatedly, either by word or action, challenges the survivor’s perceptions, memories, and/or core narratives and beliefs, such that (b) the survivor experiences self-doubt about what they perceive, remember, or believe. A third stage follows but is not definitional to gaslighting, in which the gaslightee either does or does not regain self-trust. It is worth noting that, while the second part (self-doubt) is necessary for a given dynamic to constitute as gaslighting, it is not an inevitable outcome of the first part (challenging tactics). One could imagine a whole range of

other responses, such as incredulity, anger, or distress in the face of the very same tactics that might lead another person (or the same person in a different context) to experience self-doubt. *Lack of self-doubt in the face of gaslighting tactics—unwillingness to concede to another person’s attempts to override one’s perceptions of reality—might be thought of as a form of “resistance.”*

### **Ecological Approach**

This study approaches gaslighting from an ecological systems framework for human development and psychology, which understands that individuals exist within many levels of dynamic, transactional systems, from intimate partnerships and families, to neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, to whole nations, cultures, and societies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Trauma scholars have adapted this model to frame survivors’ experiences of trauma, resilience, and recovery within complex multicultural and ecological systems (Harvey, 1996, 2007; Tummala-Narra, 2007). According to this ecological approach, trauma, resilience, and recovery all occur through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their contexts at the individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional levels. In this view, an person’s history and background, experiences of social connection or isolation, family system, cultural values and identities, and experiences of systemic oppression are all central to understanding the processes by which trauma, resilience, and recovery—and, in this case, specifically gaslighting—unfold. While the current study focuses particularly on gaslighting as a phenomenon that occurs in intimate relationships, various ecological factors shape these relationships. Therefore, this study will attend to contextual factors insofar as they contribute to gaslighting in IPV.



## **Current Study**

The current study aims to understand the dynamic process of gaslighting in the context of IPV, as a case study of gaslighting and of epistemic injustice, more broadly. Through qualitative interviews with IPV survivors, this study develops a rich and nuanced account of their experiences of gaslighting tactics in intimate relationships and ensuing self-doubt (or resistance to self-doubt.) Survivors further described the long-term implications of gaslighting on their self-trust and well-being. Finally, this study investigates the influence of various ecological factors, including individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional factors, on the gaslighting process. The findings of this study may contribute to advocacy for and development of needed supports and services for survivors of gaslighting.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter consists of three main sections: The first provides an overview of the existing empirical literature on gaslighting in IPV, including the broader context of psychological abuse and coercive control and more specific literature on the tactics of gaslighting (part A) and impact on epistemic self-trust (part B). The second section reviews literature on the role of ecological factors in gaslighting at the individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional levels. The third section introduces Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as a sensitizing theory for this study. Finally, study aims are reviewed in the context of the literature.

### **Gaslighting in IPV**

IPV is defined as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former partner (i.e. spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner)” (Breiding et al., 2015), and it has reached epidemic proportions, both in the United States and around the world (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010; Carney & Barner, 2012; Devries et al., 2013). In the United States, 37.3% of women report having experienced physical violence, sexual violence or stalking by an intimate partner (S. Smith et al., 2017), and IPV survivors experience a range of harmful sequelae, including profound emotional distress and mental illness (e.g. Lagdon, Armour, & Stringer, 2014), physical health problems (e.g. Plichta, 2004), social isolation (e.g. Goodman, Smyth, Borges, & Singer, 2009), financial hardship (e.g. Tolman, 2011), and mortality due to suicide and homicide (e.g. McLaughlin, O’Carroll, & O’Connor, 2012; Stöckl et al., 2013).

While, until recently, the term gaslighting has appeared sparsely in the IPV literature, survivors and scholars have documented its presence under various other names, referring to the

“mind games,” “unreality,” “surreality,” and “crazy-making” of abuse (Eisenberg, 2011; Ferraro, 2006; Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Loring, 1994; Williamson, 2010). The following sections discuss the distinct but related constructs of psychological abuse and coercive control, and where gaslighting fits into them. A review is then provided of the existing literature on gaslighting abuse tactics (part A) and the impact of these tactics on survivors’ epistemic self-trust (part B). (No literature to-date has explored what follows these two parts, that is, the extent to which survivors are able to re-establish epistemic self-trust.) This body of literature is sparse and fragmented, but, taken together, it begins to sketch a picture of gaslighting as a common and destructive phenomenon in many abusive relationships.

### **Psychological Abuse**

Psychological abuse, along with physical, sexual, and economic abuse, is one of the major forms of IPV. It is so prevalent, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that almost half of all men and women in the United States have experienced at least one form of it (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). Psychological abuse also often co-occurs with other forms of IPV. For instance, one study of over 3000 IPV survivors found that 93% of relationships involving physical abuse also include psychological abuse (Henning & Klesges, 2003).

From the early days of the domestic violence (DV)<sup>1</sup> movement, the negative effects of psychological abuse have been clear: In Lenore Walker’s influential (1979) book, *The Battered Woman*, survivors described verbal harassment and psychological humiliation as the worst parts of their IPV experience. Since then, psychological abuse has been associated with a range of

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<sup>1</sup> The term IPV is more commonly used in academic literature, while the term DV is typically favored by practice communities. The two will be used synonymously and interchangeably throughout this study.

negative sequelae including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008; Street & Arias, 2001), depression (Coker et al., 2002; Dutton et al., 1999; Mechanic et al., 2008; Orava, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Taft et al., 2006), anxiety (Taft et al., 2006), substance abuse (Coker et al., 2002; Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003), low self-esteem (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Sackett & Saunders, 1999), and negative health outcomes, such as chronic pain, arthritis, stomach ulcers, and gastrointestinal issues (Coker et al., 2002; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Straight et al., 2003). Some studies suggest that psychological abuse is at least, if not more, strongly associated with negative outcomes than physical or sexual abuse (e.g. Marshall, 1999; O'Leary, 1999).

Risk and protective factors that contribute to the likelihood of psychological abuse in intimate partnerships have been less clearly documented than for physical and sexual abuse, perhaps, at least in part, because its intangible nature makes it harder to identify and predict (Schumacher, Smith Slep, & Heyman, 2001). However, some research does suggest that a range of individual, relationship, and social factors can contribute to risk of experiencing psychological abuse: One meta-analysis found that women's drug use was associated with experiencing psychological aggression (Moore et al., 2008), and a systematic review of longitudinal studies found that harming partners' histories of adolescent physical abuse, as well as both partners' histories of behavioral problems and substance use in adolescence predicted psychological abuse (Costa et al., 2015). One large population-based phone survey found that women who had experienced physical abuse as children or witnessed violence between their parents were three-to-four times more likely to experience psychological abuse from a partner (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Wynkoop Simmons, 2003). Relational factors, such as communication patterns and

attachment styles, have also been associated with psychological abuse (Schumacher et al., 2001), and low socioeconomic status (SES) in a survivor's family of origin has also been associated with later risk of experiencing psychological abuse (Costa et al., 2015).

Psychological abuse exists within a network of other similar and overlapping constructs, such as emotional abuse, psychological maltreatment, and psychological aggression (Breiding et al., 2014; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Loring, 1994; Tolman, 1989). In his early and influential work on psychological abuse, Richard Tolman identified challenges to defining and assessing its boundaries, pointing out, for instance, that a single abusive behavior may have multiple overlapping impacts on a survivor and that abusive intent can be difficult to assess (Tolman, 1992). For these reasons, he suggested that psychological abuse be assessed through a combination of the “topography” of the act *and* the harm that it causes (Tolman, 1992). He also noted that, broadly construed, psychological abuse can include any behavior that intends to or causes harm, but that such behavior is almost inevitable in all human relationships. Thus a more clinically useful definition of psychological abuse recognizes a continuum of abuse and seeks to identify patterns of maltreatment (Lammers et al., 2005; Loring, 1994; Tolman, 1992). Loring has also provided the following helpful definition of emotional abuse:

Emotional abuse is an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another. The essential ideas, feelings, perceptions and personality characteristics of the victim are constantly belittled. Eventually the victim begins to experience these aspects of the self as seriously eroded or absent. (Loring, 1994, p.1)

The diminishment of self, identified here as a key characteristic of psychological abuse, aligns with the epistemic self-doubt and “existential silencing” of gaslighting, described above

(Abramson, 2014). This suggests that gaslighting fits into the broader construct of IPV as an aspect of psychological abuse.

### **Coercive Control**

According to a coercive control model of IPV, which developed out of the Duluth model (Pence & Paymar, 1986, 1993), abusive relationships are best understood as a pervasive pattern of power and control, accomplished through actual or threatened violence, along with a variety of other tactics, including isolation, intimidation, and withholding resources (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; E. Stark, 2007). While psychological abuse, as described above, specifically concerns those aspects of abuse that inflict psychological (as opposed to, e.g. physical) harm, coercive control can encompass physical, sexual, and psychological abuse tactics (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; E. Stark, 2007). Furthermore, all instances of psychological abuse do not necessarily fall under the umbrella of coercive control. For example, a harming partner may scream insults at a survivor that feel harmful but which may or may not fit into a broader pattern of controlling dynamics.

Based on a review of these related constructs, it seems that gaslighting in IPV would always constitute a form of psychological abuse, but it may not *always* constitute a form of coercive control. It is possible to imagine a situation in which one person undermines another's memories, perceptions, or beliefs for reasons other than control, for instance, just out of a vindictive desire to cause harm. However, in most cases, gaslighting is likely to fit into a larger pattern of power and control. In particular, coercive and controlling partners may employ gaslighting as an effective tool for "wearing down" a survivor's resistance and resolve, as suggested by Dutton and Goodman (2005), thereby rendering the survivor more susceptible to other forms of

manipulation and control. Similarly, other tactics of coercive control may wear down a survivor's *epistemic* resolve, making them more vulnerable to gaslighting.

### **Part A of Gaslighting: Tactics**

In one early and influential book chapter on psychological abuse, Richard Tolman (1992) identified psychological destabilization as one of the primary categories of psychological abuse and described it in the following way:

Psychological destabilization denotes acts that leave the victim unclear as to the validity of her own perceptions. This feeling may be brought about by the abuser's lying, manipulation, or other deliberate attempts to confuse the victim. An abuser may deny his actions or blame his partner for his abusive behavior or angry moods. He may lie about his whereabouts or activities and then accuse her of overreacting when she confronts him. He may hide her possessions and deny any knowledge of their whereabouts. (Tolman, 1992, p. 297)

This description of manipulative abuse tactics that cause the survivor to question the validity of their own perceptions maps clearly onto the conceptualization of gaslighting advanced in this paper. It speaks to both the tactics of gaslighting (denying, lying, hiding things, accusing of overreacting, etc.) and the survivor's resulting loss of trust in their own perceptions. Each is explored in more detail below.

**Identifying Gaslighting Tactics.** Gaslighting abuse tactics may be challenging to identify because the same tactic may lead to different – and sometimes even multiple – outcomes (Tolman, 1992). For instance, in the quotation above, the tactics of lying, blaming, and denying actions could be abusive for reasons other than that they make a survivor experience epistemic

self-doubt. A survivor who has been lied to may feel angry, trapped, or powerless, without feeling like they are losing their mind, in which case, the abuse is not gaslighting. Because of this, examples of gaslighting tactics in the literature only become evident when accompanied by a description of lost self-trust. Marti Tamm Loring's (1994) book, *Emotional Abuse*, provided multiple such examples: In one, a husband repeatedly told his wife, "You don't think that" or, "You don't feel that way" (p. 5). However, it only becomes clear that this was gaslighting because the wife, in response, began to question what she really thought and felt. In another example, a harming partner insulted a survivor's intelligence, and she started to believe him: "When Albert called her 'stupid,' 'worthless,' and 'the brain-dead one,' Terry felt as if she were 'coming apart': 'I come apart and lose touch with parts of myself—my ideas, values, and my style of behaving. I don't know myself anymore'" (Loring, 1994, p. 5). Other examples include a story of man denying his partner's recollection of events until she began to doubt her own sanity, from a book on IPV (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998), and a survivor's recollection, "I felt I was nuts... He would always say, you are wrong, it did not happen, you said this... I would try to explain, but he would keep saying I was wrong, over and over, until I could not work out whether I had said it or not" (Lammers et al., 2005, p. 46), from a qualitative study on emotional abuse. In all of these instances, the harming partner's lies, denials, and accusations only became gaslighting when the survivor began to doubt themselves.

**Assessment of Tactics.** While abuse tactics can only truly be identified as gaslighting based on a survivor's response to them, some measures of psychological abuse have included items about tactics that hint at its presence. The commonly used Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI) was developed using a six-item conceptual framework, one of which was, "Defining her reality, getting her to question her own perceptions, judgments" (Tolman,



1989). This suggests that the concept of gaslighting was central to this measure from its inception, and, indeed measure items such as, “Told me my feelings were crazy” and “Tried to make me feel crazy” (Tolman, 1989) would at least be likely to contribute to epistemic self-doubt. A validation study of the PMWI found significant differences in these items that referenced crazy-making tactics between participants who had been “battered” versus those who were merely in “distressed” relationships (that participants found dissatisfactory but not abusive; Tolman, 1999), making these clear tactics of abuse.

Other psychological abuse measures also include items related to gaslighting, particularly in reference to crazy-making. The Profile of Psychological Abuse identifies four factors of psychological abuse: jealous control, ignore, ridicule traits, and criticize behavior (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). One of the items loading on the ridicule traits factor is, “Suggest you’re crazy or stupid”, and this ridicule factor has been found to be the most strongly associated with the severity of psychological abuse (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) includes similar items such as, “Tries to convince other people that I am crazy”, “Tells other people that there’s something wrong with me”, and “Questions my sanity” (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). The Questionnaire on Psychological Abuse (QPA), a measure that directly names gaslighting as a subfactor of blaming behaviors, includes under the gaslighting subfactor items such as, “My partner denied having told me things that he really had told me,” and, “My partner accused me of constantly imagining things that hadn’t happened” (Moreno-Manso, Blázquez-Alonso, García-Baamonde, Guerrero-Barona, & Pozueco-Romero, 2014). Finally, The Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse of Women Scale (SOPAS) assesses not only the harming partner’s behavior but also the survivor’s response, including the item, “Say something that makes you worry about whether you’re going crazy” (Marshall, 1999). While

imperfect metrics of the presence of gaslighting, these measures suggest that at least gaslighting-like behaviors and consequences have been documented and assessed by researchers seeking to quantify the experience of psychological abuse.

**Prevalence of Tactics.** While no research to date has explicitly assessed the prevalence of gaslighting among IPV survivors or the general population, a small number of studies begin to indicate just how common it might be, though only through the measurement of potential tactics, without data on survivor responses. A 2014 report by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) and the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health (NCDVTMH) assessed the prevalence of mental health coercion among callers to the NDVH (Warshaw et al., 2014). The authors defined mental health coercion as using mental health treatment or diagnoses as a means to control a partner (Warshaw et al., 2014), and a follow up toolkit on screening, assessing and counseling for mental health coercion explicitly listed gaslighting as a form of mental health coercion (Warshaw & Tinnon, 2018). The NDVH survey included a sample of 2,875 callers, and three of the five mental health coercion questions that participants responded to pertained to the crazy-making dynamics of gaslighting: The first question asked, “Has your partner or ex-partner ever called you ‘crazy’ or accused you of being ‘crazy’?” (Warshaw et al., 2014, p. 5), and 85.7% of respondents replied “yes”. For the second question, 50.2% of participants responded affirmatively to, “Has your partner or ex-partner ever threatened to report to authorities that you are ‘crazy’ to keep you from getting something you want or need (e.g. custody of children, medication, protective order?)” (Warshaw et al., 2014, p. 5), and, for the third question, 73.8% responded affirmatively to, “Do you think your partner or ex-partner has ever deliberately done things to make you feel like you are going crazy or losing your mind?” (Warshaw et al., 2014, p. 5). A smaller quantitative study of 82 Norwegian women

seeking help for IPV produced similar findings: 76.3% endorsed the question, “Told me my feelings were irrational or crazy” and 73.8% endorsed the question, “Tried to make me feel crazy” (Alsaker, Moen, Morken, & Baste, 2018, p. 3). While the questions in these studies do not directly assess the presence of gaslighting, since they do not reference survivor responses to the abuse tactics, they do tentatively suggest the high prevalence of gaslighting in abusive relationships, as well as the use gaslighting tactics to limit survivor access to critical resources.

### **Part B of Gaslighting: Self-Doubt**

The second part of gaslighting, as described above, involves the survivor’s loss of epistemic self-trust, in response to gaslighting tactics. While loss of self-trust is not an inevitable consequence of these tactics, it is a necessary component of the definition of gaslighting. One study on self-trust defined it as, “an unquestioned acceptance of one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions as valid indicators of the individual’s subjective experience” (Pasveer, 1997, p.10), or, simply put, “a leap of faith that ‘I am who I am and I feel what I feel’” (Pasveer, 1997, p. 11). This definition aligns with the concept of *epistemic* self-trust employed in this paper, that is, trusting oneself as a knower- which may be distinct from, e.g. trusting oneself to have good taste or to be a morally good person. More fundamental than these other forms of self-trust, epistemic self-trust is concerned with a person’s core ability to make valid or accurate assessments about themselves and the world. The following sections review different ways that the epistemic self-doubt of gaslighting has been described in existing literature, include a sense of surreality, self-questioning, feeling crazy, and total destruction of sense of self.

**Surreality.** Gaslighting by another name becomes evident in the literature when survivors describe a loss of epistemic self-trust. In some cases, this self-doubt may be described as a sense of losing touch with reality or warped reality. In her (2006) book *Neither Angels Nor*

*Demons*, on IPV survivors who have committed crimes, Kathleen Ferraro dedicated an entire chapter to the ways that survivors negotiate “surreality” in abusive relationships. The book presented findings from interviews with 45 survivors, who described the way that harming partners played “mind games” that challenged their memories and perceptions and undermined their confidence in their ability to know what was real (Ferraro, 2006). They described gradually starting to doubt their sensory perceptions and other sources of knowledge about the world, questioning assumptions that once seemed certain and safe, and experiencing feelings of confusion and betrayal. In these interviews, survivors began to sketch out poignant and terrifying descriptions of what gaslighting can do to a person’s grasp on reality, described as the “violent imposition of one person’s perception on the other,” a sense that their “basic view of the world [has been] turned upside down,” or simply feeling that they are living in a “twilight zone” (Ferraro, 2006, pp. 73-74). Similar to Ferraro’s depiction of “surreality,” another study, presenting findings from oral history interviews with IPV survivors, described an experience of “unreality” (Williamson, 2010). In this study, survivors recounted the ways that their harming partners’ reality came to define their own, as well as the ways they manipulated survivors into appearing crazy in public, in front of other people (Williamson, 2010).

**Questioning.** Along with experiencing distorted reality, gaslighting survivors also describe generally doubting themselves as thinkers and actors. For instance, survivors describe losing the ability to trust their own judgments and perform simple tasks. In one example, a survivor began to feel incompetent even to make simple decisions like choosing the right kind of bread or candy bar at the store (P. H. Smith, Tessaro, & Earp, 1995). In another paper on gender, power dynamics, and appraisal distortions in IPV, which mentioned gaslighting by name, participants described grappling with distorted thoughts about themselves and noticing persistent

ramifications both inside and outside of their relationships (Whiting, Oka, & Fife, 2012). As one survivor simply described it, “He caused me to question a lot of what I believe” (Whiting, Oka, & Fife, 2012, p. 142). A dissertation, which also explicitly used the term gaslighting, described the implications of this form of abuse for adults who experienced gaslighting as children:

The results of this study suggest that an individual whose knowledge and feelings have been repeatedly “gaslighted” may come to devalue her own sense-making. She may develop a disposition or stance of self-doubt and disbelief in her ability to know, feel or need which is then brought into adulthood (Portnow, 1996, p. 262)

A survivor’s sense that they are an unreliable thinker, perceiver, or knower, as in these examples, may ultimately translate into a feeling of overall madness or craziness, described in the following section.

**Crazy-Making.** Survivors frequently describe feeling crazy or insane, as a result of gaslighting. A review of qualitative literature on psychological abuse from the 1990s found that psychological abuse survivors would often report feeling confused and brainwashed, doubting their own sanity (Sleutel, 1998). “It’s striking,” the author remarked, “that statements from women in multiple studies... used identical terminology of brainwashing, going crazy, and being a prisoner” (Sleutel, 1998, p. 527). This notion of feeling crazy due of abuse has emerged in other places as well: In one mixed-methods dissertation, which referred to gaslighting by name as a form of covert abuse, ten out of ten interview participants endorsed chronic gaslighting and described questioning their sanity both within and outside of the abusive relationship (Burnett, 2020). In another dissertation on survivors’ experiences of leaving emotionally abusive relationships, one participant used similar language, describing their abuse as “crazy-making” (Eisenberg, 2011). In a recent auto-ethnographic account of IPV as a form of domestic terrorism,

two survivor-scholars also used the term “crazy-making” to describe the way their harming partners questioned their perceptions until they felt like they were losing their minds, explaining, “Above all else, this tactic undermines a woman’s sense of self, her mental health, and her confidence in both her memory and her reasoning powers” (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016, p. 47). The authors agreed that, of all of the forms of abuse they experienced, this “crazy-making” was the most destructive to their autonomy and sense of self (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016).

**Destruction of Self.** The “existential silencing” of gaslighting, theorized by Abramson (2014), also emerges in empirical literature when survivors describe losing their identity or sense of self due to gaslighting. One qualitative study depicted the ways that survivors’ identities were fundamentally altered by the negative images of themselves that harming partners reflected (P. H. Smith et al., 1995). One survivor described being broken down by the negative things the harming partner said to her, until she began to doubt whether she could do anything right or whether she was any good at all (P. H. Smith et al., 1995). Another survivor in this study became so confused by the abuse tactics that she found herself wondering, “God, maybe I am a slut; maybe I am a whore” (Smith et al., 1995, p. 177). One study of overt and subtle forms of psychological abuse among low-income women illustrated the way that subtle forms of abuse (such as undermining and discrediting) can lead survivors to question their perceptions. The study found that this kind of subtle psychological undermining – which closely mirrored gaslighting – was the most consistent, strong predictor of negative mental health, physical health, and relationship outcomes (e.g. reported relationship quality and duration) (Marshall, 1999). Discussing these findings, the author noted:

Apparently, having one’s sense of self weakened results in the broadest effects. A sense of self is central to factors associated with personal well-being and is important for

judgments about one's relationship. It is likely that most aspects of life could be affected if a woman did not believe in herself or trust her own perceptions. (Marshall, 1999, p. 81)

Another study pointed out the critical distinction between the loss of self-identity and loss of self-esteem. The difference, the authors argued is that self-identity pertains to how well one *knows* oneself, while self-esteem pertains to how much one *values* oneself (Lammers et al., 2005). They argued that self-identity is more fundamental to a person's wellbeing, because one can know oneself without thinking very highly of oneself, but a person who feels confusion about who they are does not even have a foundation upon which to build self-esteem (Lammers et al., 2005).

As described above, it seems that gaslighting has the potential to introduce doubt into all areas of a survivor's life, including their fundamental sense of self. Given this, it is not surprising that, as one book on IPV has suggested, when survivors begin to doubt their own grasp on reality, they also lose autonomy and independence in their relationships, becoming increasingly reliant on harming partners and therefore increasingly under their control (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). In this way, gaslighting may deepen dynamics of power and control through "wearing down" the survivor, as previously discussed in Dutton and Goodman's (2005) formulation of coercive control.

### **The Ecology of Gaslighting**

Having reviewed the literature on both the tactics and psychological experience of gaslighting, the following section turns to the small body of literature that suggests how ecological factors may impact a survivor's self-doubt or resistance to doubt. It will present ecological factors at the individual level (e.g. aspects of a survivor's personality or experiences), interpersonal level (e.g. relationships with family and friends), ideological level (e.g. stereotypes

or other internalized social beliefs), and institutional level (e.g. interactions with societal systems or institutions.)

### **Individual Ecological Factors**

Although no prior research has investigated individual factors that might contribute to gaslighting dynamics specifically, existing psychological abuse literature suggests potential avenues for exploration. For instance, childhood abuse experiences have been documented as a risk factor for adulthood experiences of psychological abuse, in the context of IPV (Bensley et al., 2003), and one qualitative dissertation on self-doubt in adults found that some people who reported feeling gaslit by their families, as children, later described a disposition towards self-doubt, which they carried into their adult relationships (Portnow, 1996). Taken together, these findings might suggest that survivors with histories of gaslighting or other similar forms of psychological abuse may be more likely to experience self-doubt when a harming partner attempts to gaslight them. Mental health history may be a related source of vulnerability for self-doubt: If a harming partner attempts to convince a survivor that they are “crazy” or in some way unreliable or unbelievable, anything from a survivor’s history that lends credence to this accusation may exacerbate vulnerability. Instances of harming partners making these kinds of accusations against survivors with histories of severe mental illness, such as dissociative identity disorder (DID) have been documented in the literature (Snyder, 2018), and one can imagine that any experiences of psychosis, dissociation, or “breaking” with reality in any other way might contribute to self-doubt.

Individual factors that contribute to a survivor’s ability to resist self-doubt or regain self-trust have not been studied before, but it possible that, rather than exacerbating vulnerability, prior experiences of gaslighting or other psychological abuse may instead help survivors to



recognize gaslighting tactics when they occur, strengthening their ability to resist. It may also be the case that a certain degree of underlying self-confidence, whether characterological or grounded in prior experiences, may be valuable for maintaining trust in one's own perceptions, when challenged.

### **Interpersonal Ecological Factors**

In an ecological framework, interpersonal factors are those that pertain to survivors' relationships, social supports, and immediate community. Family ties, experiences of social isolation, and strong neighborhood community are all examples of the kinds of ecological factors that might be relevant to a survivor's development of epistemic self-doubt or resistance in the face of gaslighting tactics. In one article on IPV survivors, the authors asserted, "Depending on the social supports available, and the personality of the battered woman, the man's accusations of inadequacy may assume the status of truth" (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, p. 330). This quotation speaks to the impacts of social isolation on a survivor's ability to fend off the gaslighter's imposed version of reality. Harming partners may try to deepen survivor isolation by engaging in gaslighting tactics that involve other people. For instance, they may tell others that there is something wrong with the survivor (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998) or try to manipulate the survivor into appearing crazy in front of other people or in public places (Williamson, 2010). These tactics might literally isolate survivors from their friends and family, or they may simply make survivors feel more confused and alone.

While isolation may deepen self-doubt, social supports may help survivors fight against it. Previous research suggests that abusive behaviors may be easier for a survivor to rationalize when they are socially isolated, because other people may provide valuable counter-narratives and conflicting perspectives (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). Supportive and trusting others have

played a critical role in gaslighting survivors' resistance to self-doubt since the original example of gaslighting: At the end of the film *Gaslight* the main character only begins to believe her own senses again and challenge her husband when a Scotland Yard inspector arrives and corroborates her perceptions, reaffirming her sense of reality for the first time since the gaslighting abuse began (Cukor, 1944). Relational re-establishment of self-trust emerges in the empirical literature as well. One book on emotional abuse argued that survivors who have lost their sense of self may begin to re-establish this through other, non-abusive relationships (Loring, 1994), and group therapy has been suggested to be particularly effective in the aftermath of psychological abuse, because survivors can mutually validate one-another's experiences (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Survivors may experience relief when they find others who can name, understand, and validate their otherwise "mystifying" experiences of abuse (Tolman, 1992, p. 298). Outside of the realm of IPV, survivors of childhood gaslighting have endorsed, "the extreme importance of having their needs and sense-making validated by significant and respected others as an instrumental and necessary first step to their reclaiming their own sense-making" (Portnow, 1996, p. 270). In two case examples of gaslighting by therapists or psychoanalysts, survivors have described a sense of mistrust pervading and effecting all other relationships, though both also described beginning the process of healing through other relationships as well (Elise, 2015; Tormoen, 2019). Taken together, these examples begin to sketch an image of how social supports (or, conversely, social isolation) may profoundly influence a survivor's gaslighting experience.

### **Ideological Ecological Factors**

The previous section addressed role of relationships, connection, and social support in survivor experiences of self-doubt and self-trust during the gaslighting process. However, one cannot fully understand these kinds of interpersonal factors without also considering ideological

factors – that is, the internalized and socialized beliefs, values, and images, that pervade interpersonal relationships. One sociological interview study with gaslighting survivors documented the way that harming partners employed stereotypes about women as hysterical, aggressive, or “crazy bitches,” particularly in the context of motherhood and female sexuality, to subordinate and control them (Sweet, 2019). These tactics were intersectional as well, for instance specifically invoking negative stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality or mothering (Sweet, 2019). Research has also documented harming partners’ invocation of stereotypes about survivors with mental illness or disabilities as crazy, sick, or unreliable (Bonomi, Nichols, Kammes, & Green, 2017; Snyder, 2018; Warshaw et al., 2014). For instance, in one grounded theory study of IPV survivors with DID, a survivor recalls the harming partner saying, “I can’t trust you because you’re crazy. You have all these problems, so how do I know that anything you say is true?” (Snyder, 2018, p. 30).

The invocation of harmful stereotypes as a gaslighting tactic has also been documented outside of the context of IPV. For instance, a few articles have referred to the concept of racial gaslighting (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Roberts & Carter Andrews, 2013; Tobias & Joseph, 2018; Young & Young, 2019). Davis and Ernst (2019) describe racial gaslighting as the way that white supremacy is normalized and perpetuated by pathologizing and punishing people of Color who resist it. While these articles describe the ways that institutions dismiss or discredit people of Color, they do not explicitly address any subjective experiences of diminished self-trust as a result of these policies and behaviors. Experiences of heightened self-doubt in response to these kinds of racial gaslighting tactics certainly exist, but further research is needed explore how this process unfolds.

Harmful stereotypes may be weaponized as a gaslighting tactic, but these ideological factors may also, separately, contribute to survivor self-doubt. A number of scholars and researchers have documented women's internalization of lower worth, value, or importance than men, rendering them more susceptible to self-doubt in heterosexual relationships (Lammers et al., 2005; Loring, 1994; Miller, 1986). Conversely, men may also be susceptible to self-doubt when female harming partners invoke traditional gender roles to try to convince both him and others that *he* must be the real perpetrator (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019). Survivors struggling with substance abuse may also be particularly likely to experience self-doubt (Ferraro, 2006), as may survivors with a range of other marginalized identities and experiences, such as survivors with immigrant backgrounds. For instance, Sweet (2019) provided an example of a survivor who was successfully convinced by the harming partner that she was the source of all the problems in their relationship because, as an immigrant, she simply did not understand how relationships worked in the United States. Finally, one study of childhood gaslighting survivors found that, in general, survivors who identified as "outsiders" or felt "othered" in some way (e.g. race, sexual orientation, nationality) were particularly likely to devalue their own thinking and find it difficult to defend (Portnow, 1996).

No literature to-date has explored the ways that internalized ideologies influence resistance or redevelopment of self-trust. However, Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has spoken to the importance of self-definition in the face of stereotypes, to minimize the negative impacts of internalized oppression on self-esteem (e.g. "I am not just an angry Black woman. I am a woman who is assertive and clear.") This form of self-definition and affirmation, as well as receiving similar messages from one's community and broader culture, may be important to gaslighting resistance.

## **Institutional Ecological Factors**

A survivor's interactions with institutions, such as the law enforcement and legal systems, health and mental healthcare providers, and immigration, child protection, and welfare services may also influence the gaslighting process. The following section explores some of the ways that these systems may exacerbate or mitigate the harms of gaslighting.

Institutional betrayal occurs when, “trusted and powerful institutions (schools, churches, military, government) [act] in ways that visit harm upon those dependent on them for safety and wellbeing” (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014, p.575). Institutional betrayal, like other forms of betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1996), can lead to serious harms because survivors often trust and depend on systems and reach out to them for help (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). Consequently, institutional betrayal may be understood as a form of secondary assault and has been associated with increased depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms among IPV survivors (Lee, Micol, & Davis, 2019). Credibility discounting, which occurs when institutions and institutional gatekeepers dismiss or disbelieve survivors' stories is a form of institutional betrayal (Epstein & Goodman, 2019), and gaslighters may invoke “institutional vulnerabilities” to discredit survivors as a gaslighting tactic (Sweet, 2019). For instance, they may leverage stereotypes of Black women as “aggressive” in order to convince the police that the gaslightee is actually the one causing harm (Sweet, 2019). Similarly, they may also use a survivor's undocumented status to convince them that they are being surveilled by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or threaten to institutionalize survivors who have mental illness (Sweet, 2019). While these kinds of threats and undermining behaviors do not necessarily constitute gaslighting, they are more likely to succeed in inducing self-doubt when institutional responses appear to confirm them.

Recent research on the legal system has suggested that institutional betrayal may perpetuate survivor self-doubt: In an interview study examining IPV survivors' experiences of litigation abuse in family court, one interviewee described her hunger to be believed and validated by the court system after being discredited for so long by her ex-partner and the devastation she felt when the court system disbelieved her, furthering undermining her experiences and perceptions (Gutowski & Goodman, 2020). Another recent paper discussed the impacts of survivor credibility discounting in court, as illustrated by one of the authors' legal clients:

[My harming partner] found my most vulnerable point, a tiny kernel of insecurity in my soul, and he exploited it to trap me in a painfully confusing state of nearly total self-doubt. I spent more than a year working so hard to regain trust in my own perceptions and my own humanity. But now I find that the legal system doubts me too, even as I share my more painful and personal story. I get hurt again and again. It is painfully confusing and I find that it has caused a significant regression in my overall healing (Epstein & Goodman, 2019, p. 50).

This quotation provides a small window into the ways that institutions may impede the re-establishment of self-trust by colluding with the harming partner's gaslighting tactics.

The opposite of institutional betrayal is the institutional courage of transparent and accountable systems (Freyd, 2014; Freyd & Smidt, 2019). While it has not been studied, institutional courage may serve as a buffer against the harms of gaslighting, as opposed to colluding with it. For instance, while custody litigation can be a retraumatizing experience for many IPV survivors, those who do encounter supportive court actors have reported feeling heard and supported, and experiencing gratitude and relief (Gutowski & Goodman, 2020). These kinds

of positive system interactions may provide survivors with critical validation for re-establishing self-trust. When institutional actors believe survivors, this may increase their confidence that they can believe themselves.

### **Sensitizing Theory: Relational Cultural Theory**

Sensitizing concepts refer to concepts that provide scholars with preliminary guidance or starting points for their empirical research (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2003). Rather than insisting on “prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), the primary sensitizing theory for this study, was initially developed by a group of women psychologists in the 1970s and 80s, in response to a sense that most theorists in the mental health field gravely misunderstood women, most notably mistaking their need for and investment in relationships for a weakness, when in fact it is often a source of strength (Jordan, 2017; Miller, 1976). Contrary to previous models of human development, which conceptualize human flourishing through individuation, separation, and self-actualization – e.g. a “separate self” – RCT emphasizes the central role of mutual, growth-fostering relationships in wellbeing across the lifespan – e.g. a “self-in-relation” (Jordan, 2001, 2017; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991).

The current study was informed by RCT’s emphasis on (a) the importance of relationships for the development of individuals’ sense of self and (b) the role of systemic power and marginalization in shaping relationships. According to RCT, people seek connection in relationships, but fleeting moments of disconnection—lapses in empathy or mutual understanding—are inevitable. However, when people experience *chronic* disconnection, they begin to retreat or hide parts of themselves, even attempting to “twist” who they are, to better align with the others around them (Jordan, 2001, 2017). From an RCT lens, gaslighting might be

thought of as a form of chronic disconnection, an *epistemic* disconnection, whereby a person fundamentally “twists” their perceptions of themselves or the world. However, RCT also suggests that “real connection creates healing” (Jordan, 2017, p. 241), and “the fragmentation caused by the violation of human bonds can only be healed by new and healing human bonds” (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 57; Comstock et al., 2008). Therefore, while an individual’s trust in their own knowing abilities might be destroyed interpersonally, through gaslighting, perhaps it could also be healed or rebuilt interpersonally, through validation and support from others outside of the gaslighting relationship. This conceptual framework aligns with the literature reviewed above on interpersonal ecological factors in gaslighting.

RCT theorists further describe the ways that controlling images-- harmful social stereotypes that are leveraged against marginalized groups in order to control their behavior—may lead people to have a distorted perception of themselves (Collins, 1986, 2000; Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008; M. Walker, 1999; M. Walker & Miller, 2001). This distorted sense of self may heighten a survivor’s susceptibility to self-doubt in the face of gaslighting tactics, particularly when harming partners leverage controlling images as part of the abuse. The element of RCT supports the above discussion of ideological ecological factor. As a sensitizing theory, RCT’s concepts of controlling images and healing through connection particularly guided this study’s attention to and investigation of survivors’ interpersonal and ideological ecologies.

### **Study Aims in the Context of Literature**

The above review draws together the existing, sparse empirical literature on gaslighting in interpersonal relationships, along with research on related phenomena within the realm of psychological abuse and relevant theory. Collectively, this literature begins to hint at but does not fully address the following questions: What are the range of tactics that gaslighters employ to



accomplish their ends? How do survivors describe the way that these tactics shake their trust in their own knowing abilities? How and to what extent does their fundamental sense of self-trust heal or recover, after gaslighting tactics end? Finally, what elements of a survivor's experiences, communities, and broader sociocultural contexts exacerbate or attenuate self-doubt in response to gaslighting tactics? In particular, within an RCT framework, how might controlling images exacerbate survivor self-doubt and how might connection with others attenuate it? The current study provides the first systematic, empirical, psychological account of gaslighting, with the aim of addressing these questions.

Although gaslighting may occur in any number of relationships and contexts, the current study focuses specifically on IPV survivors who experienced gaslighting as an abuse tactic from an intimate partner. The concept of gaslighting originated in the context of intimate partnerships (Cukor, 1944; Hamilton, 2015), and gaslighting in IPV is arguably the central, paradigmatic case of this epistemic form of harm. Furthermore, by focusing on gaslighting in the context of IPV, the current study aims to illuminate how gaslighting tactics fit into broader abuse dynamics and inform gaslighting-related recommendations for domestic violence practitioners.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The following chapter provides an overview of the methodology of this study, including a description of the overall study design, participants, recruitment and data collection procedures, analytic framework and approach, and methodological trustworthiness.

### **Study Design**

Qualitative research methods are particularly valuable for gaining nuanced, in-depth understanding of specific phenomena and for answering “how” and “what” questions, rather than “why” questions (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2007). Within qualitative research, this study’s methodology aligns specifically with feminist critical-ideological paradigms that recognize multiple contextual and historically situated realities and explicitly values social justice and opposes oppression (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005, 2007). Feminist research attends to the co-constructed nature of meaning and stories between researchers and participants and to describing participant experiences from their own perspectives (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005). It understands research as a relational endeavor and aims to empower and give voice to research participants, ultimately leading to tangible impacts that benefit them (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). This approach provides an essential framework for research on gaslighting, where issues of power and oppression manifest in the very questioning of a survivor’s authority to name and trust their experience of reality.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, this study took a qualitative descriptive approach (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013; Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016). Along the continuum of qualitative approaches, qualitative descriptive approaches (including qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis, and descriptive phenomenology) are often considered to be among

the least interpretive (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sandelowski, 2010; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). All research requires some interpretation, but compared to other approaches, such as grounded theory, qualitative descriptive approaches employ low-inference, or “data-near interpretations,” which describe findings in everyday language that participants and other researchers are likely to agree is accurate (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). Qualitative descriptive research, in its purest form, also maintains no commitment to a particular theory, which is not to suggest that it is wholly atheoretical but rather that theoretical frameworks are held lightly and subject to scrutiny throughout the research process (Sandelowski, 2010). Qualitative descriptive research may also borrow “hues, tones, and texture” from other qualitative approaches and paradigms, such as the critical feminist framework of the present study (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337).

### **Participants**

Eligibility for participation in this research study was determined according to the following inclusion criteria: (1) participant was a survivor of IPV, determined by screening measures described below; (2) participant was an adult over 18 years of age; (3) participant spoke English; (4) participant had experienced IPV in the past ten years but was not currently experiencing physical abuse and endorsed feeling ready to discuss their experiences of IPV. This final criterion increased the likelihood that participants would be able to speak to the process of healing. It also allowed participants time to begin to form narratives about their experiences of IPV, without being so long that other intervening factors, unrelated to the abuse, would have transformed the narrative too much. Finally it minimized the risk of retraumatizing someone who did not yet feel safe to discuss traumatic events (Campbell, Goodman-Williams, & Javorka, 2019).

Sixteen survivors completed phone or email screenings, and all were eligible to participate in the study, though one did not respond to follow up communications or complete an interview. Nine interviews were conducted by phone and six were conducted by zoom, according to participant preference. All interviews were conducted between April and September of 2021. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62 years old, with a mean age of 41. Fourteen participants identified as female, and one identified as genderqueer and nonbinary. In terms of sexual orientation, ten participants identified as heterosexual or straight, four as bisexual, and two as pansexual (one participant identified as both bi- and pansexual.) However, all of the harming partners that survivors chose to discuss in this study were male. Nine participants identified their racial identity as White or Caucasian, four as Black or African American, and two as biracial (both identified as Asian and White.) Seven participants were born in New England, four in the Midwest, one in the Mid-Atlantic, and one in the Southwestern United States. Two participants were also born outside of the United States, one in Central Europe and one in East Asia. In terms of highest level of education, two participants either had a master's degree or were in graduate school, six had a bachelor's degree, six had an associate degree, had attended trade school, or had taken some college courses, and one participant had a high school diploma. Seven were working full-time, at the time of the interviews, four were currently unemployed or not working, three reported part-time or gig work, and one identified as a housewife. Three participants were full-time undergraduate or graduate students. Ten out of fifteen participants had children. Participants had from one to five children, and they ranged in age from three to 39 years old. None of the participants in this study was still in a relationship with the person who had gaslit them, at the time of the interview. Participants' gaslighting relationships ranged from five months to 40 years long, with an average length of 10 years. Survivors had left those

relationships as recently as one year ago and as long ago as ten years. They were, on average 4.5 years out of these relationships, though a few still reported ongoing contact with the harming partner, due to shared custody or property. Six participants reported that they were currently in a different relationship, eight reported they were currently single, and one said that she was in a “friendship.”

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through existing networks of DV and mental health providers. They were provided with recruitment flyers via email and asked them to share the flyers with survivors they knew who might be interested in participating. They were also provided with a google voice number that potential participants could call to express interest in the study. While, at other times, in-person recruitment strategies, such as attending meetings at local DV organizations, might be a valuable tool, recruitment for the current study took place entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Decreased options for in-person contact impacted both study recruitment and data collection procedures. The following sections provide a brief overview of virtual “sites” of recruitment.

### **The Domestic Violence Program Evaluation and Research Collaborative**

The Domestic Violence Program Evaluation and Research Collaborative (DVPERC) is an ongoing, regional collaboration for DV researchers and practitioners in a large New England metropolitan area (Thomas et al., 2018). DVPERC initially formed in 2011 to address questions of DV program evaluation, and, since then, it has developed into a group of practitioners and researchers who meet on a quarterly basis to discuss problems of practice and collaborate on research projects (e.g. Goodman et al., 2014). In general, the member organizations are urban DV agencies that provide both shelter and non-residential services to survivors. The survivors

who receive services at these organization are diverse in various ways, though they are predominantly low-income women of Color. The population served by the organizations involved in DVPERC is also heterogeneous in terms of immigration and citizenship status, ethnic and cultural background, and gender and sexual orientation. While membership in DVPERC is fluid, at the time of recruitment, it consisted of representatives from approximately 20 DV organizations and five research institutions.

I have engaged in previous research projects with DVPERC (Goodman, Fauci, Hailes, & Gonzalez, 2019; Hailes, Colgan, Goodman, & Thomas, Under Review) and attended a few meetings. My dissertation chair, Dr. Lisa Goodman, who is one of the of the founding members, shared recruitment materials by email with the DVPERC listserv and encouraged those members who had questions to follow up with me for further information. Interested DVPERC members shared recruitment materials with survivors receiving residential and non-residential services at their organizations.

### **The Custody Awareness Collaborative**

Participants were also recruited through another local organization, the Custody Awareness Collaborative (CAC), which is comprised of DV survivors, advocates, and lawyers who advocate for policy changes to improve DV survivors' experiences of custody litigation in Probate and Family Court. CAC has been involved in research initiatives before (Gutowski & Goodman, 2020), and I have previously collaborated with this group to develop resources for survivors beginning the custody litigation process (Hailes, 2018). The present study on gaslighting represents an extension of these previous projects. As with DVPERC, I sent recruitment materials to CAC members via email and asked them to share with survivors they

knew who might be interested in participating. I also invited survivor-members of CAC to directly participate in the study, if they were interested and met inclusion criteria.

### **The Brookline Center for Community Mental Health**

I engaged in further recruitment at the community mental health center where I worked. The Brookline Center for Community Mental Health (referred to from here-on-out as the Brookline Center) has approximately 100 clinicians on staff and provides outpatient individual, couples, family and group therapy, psychopharmacology, and case management services for children and adults in the Brookline community, along with coordinating services with other community organizations and institutions including the local public schools, council on aging, and public housing (“The Brookline Center for Community Mental Health,” 2020). Clients of the Brookline Center are diverse in age, racial and ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. I had been working at the Brookline Center for over a year as a part-time unlicensed trainee psychologist at the time of recruitment and emailed recruitment materials to my colleagues, asking them to share them with any therapy clients who might be interested. Colleagues were also encouraged to forward the materials to other colleagues and professional contacts they had outside of the Brookline Center, to draw from a wider pool of therapy clients.

### **Other Recruitment and Sampling Methods**

My research team was concurrently conducting a companion interview study on survivor alternatives to calling the police in moments of crisis, recruiting survivors through DV agencies in multiple urban areas and regions in the United States. Recruitment materials for the current study were shared with the members of the research team conducting these interviews, and when they interviewed survivors who seemed like a good fit for this study, they invited them to

participate and, with the survivor's permission, shared their contact information. Recruitment proceeded through convenience sampling, using word-of-mouth, and snowball methods, asking interview participants if they know any other survivors who would be interested in talking to me.

### **Procedures**

The following section outlines the data collection procedures for this study, including screening and interviewing research participants.

#### **Participant Screening**

Participant screening determined history of IPV using the Hurt, Insult, Threaten, and Scream (HITS) screening tool (Sherin, Sinacore, Li, Zitter, & Shakil, 1998). The HITS is a brief, four-item assessment of physical and psychological abuse that has been assessed in a range of healthcare settings with diverse populations (Chen, Rovi, Vega, Jacobs, & Johnson, 2006; Rabin, Jennings, Campbell, & Bair-Merritt, 2009; Shakil, Donald, Sinacore, & Krepcho, 2005). All items on the HITS were modified from present to past tense, as participants were interviewed about past, rather than current, experiences of IPV. Participants then said whether they had had any of these experiences in the past ten years and whether they were currently in a relationship with someone who was physically harming them. Participants were also asked to confirm that they were over 18 years old, felt comfortable participating in a 45-90-minute interview in English, and were ready to discuss their experiences of domestic violence or harm by a romantic partner. See Appendix A for the full screening protocol.

#### **Interview Process**

Participants who met inclusion criteria and screened into the study were invited to schedule a 45-90-minute long interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were



conducted over the phone or Zoom and were audio recorded. Interviews began by obtaining informed consent and taking time to build trust and rapport with the participant (Morse, 2015). The interview format followed an open-ended, semi-structured protocol, to elicit survivor memories and stories about gaslighting and individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional factors that contributed to gaslighting experience. Please see Appendix B for the full interview protocol. Survivors were asked to provide aliases for themselves and their harming partners, in order to facilitate the sharing of their stories while maintaining anonymity. I took care to treat participants with the utmost respect, empathy, and supportiveness throughout the interview, recognizing and acknowledging that they were sharing intimate, sensitive, and traumatic experiences (Campbell et al., 2019; Morrow, 2005a). In my position as a counselor-researcher, I was able to use clinical skills to elicit intimate information from participants and provide containment and support if they did feel traumatically triggered during the interview process (Morrow, 2005a). For instance, the interview process brought up strong emotions for one participant, so I stayed on the phone with her for a few extra minutes after the interview and discussed grounding topics, such as her plans for the rest of the day until she felt calmer and ready to end the call. I also helped her think through who she would reach out to if she felt that she needed more support after the call. I was also prepared to share referrals to trauma-informed and culturally appropriate mental health services for participants, as needed (Campbell et al., 2019.) All interview participants also received \$25 by check or Venmo in appreciation of their time and contributions.

A relational approach is central to feminist research methods and entails building rapport with participants, and forming honest and mutual relationships (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005). Feminist researchers work in collaborative, nonhierarchical ways with participants,

seeking to reduce power dynamics between researcher and participants, and conveying gratitude and respect for participants' time and efforts (Hall & Stevens, 1991). In this study, I approached interactions with research participants from a collaborative and mutual stance, taking time at the beginning of interviews to establish rapport and conveying empathy and respect in my responses throughout the interviews. While some power dynamics are inherent between researchers and participants, I aimed to attend to them critically and minimize them whenever possible.

### **Analysis**

The following section provides an overview of the data analysis process for this study, reviewing the coding strategy and approach to theoretical saturation.

### **Coding**

This study took a qualitative content analysis approach to coding (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Qualitative content analysis is a coding process that involves condensing and synthesizing data into categories that describe a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), with a greater emphasis on description than interpretation of the topic of study (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). An inductive approach to coding was used, generating the codes from the data (as opposed to an *a priori* set of codes.) This inductive approach has been described as most appropriate for research topics that have not been the subject of substantial previous literature, such as gaslighting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding process involved three stages: First in open, or line-by-line coding, codes were freely generated in the margins of the transcript, closely mirroring participant wording; Next, codes were refined and grouped into thematic categories; Finally, these categories were used to form higher order clusters and an abstracted formulation and general description of the topic (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim &

Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each interview recording was transcribed by an undergraduate student who had been trained in transcription techniques. I served as the primary coder for all transcripts and two undergraduate students and one Mental Health Counseling MA student served as secondary coders, with whom I discuss and checked emerging codes, categories, and themes.

### **Saturation**

Data collection and analysis continued until saturation had been reached. Complete redundancy is not a reasonable goal in qualitative research, because each person's life unique, and more stories may always add richness (Morrow, 2007). Saturation has been accomplished, then, not when new interviews yield no further new insights at all, but when "data account for the complexity of the phenomenon of interest" (Morrow, 2007, p. 217). The number of interviews required to reach saturation varies between studies, but is often in the range of 10-20 interviews. The current study aimed to achieve maximum variation sampling, which entails intentionally seeking to understand both common themes *and* unique experiences among as experientially and demographically diverse a group of participants as possible (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **Dissemination**

A central feature of feminist research is its impact or relevance to address the interests and concerns of research participants and their community (Hall & Stevens, 1991). This has also been referred to as the "consequential validity" of a study, or its success in accomplishing social and political aims (Morrow, 2005). This study aims to validate survivor experiences of a prevalent and harmful yet under-studied form of IPV. It also seeks to provide insights into the mechanisms of gaslighting, to enable advocates who interact professionally with gaslighting

survivors to better understand and support them. Therefore, the aim is to ensure the impact of this research by not only publishing findings in a peer-reviewed journal, but also to enable IPV survivors and advocates to access them, for instance through presentations at IPV agencies or practice-oriented conferences, a survivor-oriented toolkit (e.g. Hailes, 2018), or op-ed pieces.

### **Trustworthiness**

Quality assessment in qualitative research has taken a number of names and forms. “Trustworthiness,” for instance, has long been used as a descriptor of qualitative research quality (Creswell, 1998; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2015). In lieu of traditional quantitative categories of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, trustworthiness aims to determine credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morse, 2015). The concept of “rigor” provides another potential framework, and some scholars have even argued for a return to traditional quantitative concepts of validity and reliability (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morse, 2015; Sandelowski, 1993). Despite differing conceptualizations of quality in qualitative research, many of the suggestions and strategies advocated for under these frameworks are the same. The term trustworthiness will be used for the purposes of this paper, and the following sections review strategies for demonstrating trustworthiness in qualitative data and interpretation.

### **Data**

Data quality can be demonstrated in a number of ways, most notably through sampling strategies, thickness of data, and attention to disconfirming evidence. Purposeful, theoretical sampling contributes to the trustworthiness of data by pursuing the research participants best equipped to deepen understanding, thereby ensuring that data can address research questions as fully and clearly as possible (Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2015). High quality data can also be

demonstrated, at least in part, by the “size and appropriateness” of the data set (Morse, 2015). Sufficiently large data sets provide “thick, rich” accounts of phenomena, which include significant overlap and consensus (Morse, 2015). However, some outliers and variation between individuals can also be expected in most research on human experience, therefore the presence of some discrepant findings is another hallmark of trustworthy data (Morse, 2015). While the necessary sample size for a study cannot be determined in advance, it should at least be large enough to contain both divergent voices and points of substantial consensus (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005).

The size and appropriateness of data was ensured in the present study by continued data collection until saturation was sufficient to capture the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, that is, the experience of gaslighting in IPV. Along with seeking a thick, rich account of gaslighting with substantial complexity, consensus, and overlap, this study also attended to both the demographic and experiential diversity of survivors.

### **Interpretation**

Once quality of data has been satisfactorily demonstrated, the trustworthiness of the researcher’s interpretation of that data must be assessed as well, even in methodological approaches like qualitative content analysis that engage in “data-near” interpretation (Sandelowski, 2010). I read each transcript several times in the early stages of the analytic process, both to ensure accuracy of description, and also to “immerse” myself in the data before beginning the formal coding process (Morrow, 2005). A constant comparative method was employed throughout the analysis, involving an ongoing comparison of new raw data with existing data and refining, condensing, and clarifying concepts and themes along the way (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From this place of deep engagement with the data, I

hoped to demonstrate trustworthiness of interpretation by accurately reflecting participant voices and sociocultural contexts in the research findings, holding myself accountable to participants and colleagues, and engaging reflexively with the research process and findings. These strategies are discussed in more detail below.

**Reflecting Voices and Contexts.** One of the primary ways of assessing the trustworthiness of interpretation is how faithfully it captures and portrays the voices and stories of participants, fairly representing their views without overwhelming researcher bias (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005). This can be demonstrated, for instance, through supporting research findings with sufficient participant quotations (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Along with accurately representing participant voices in the research findings, high quality interpretation also situates analysis within sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005). This study therefore sought to ground its findings in ample quotations from participant interviews and their sociocultural contexts.

**Accountability.** Researchers can also demonstrate trustworthy interpretation by holding their analysis accountable to participants and colleagues. One way of remaining accountable to participants is through member checking, which involves asking participants to confirm or corroborate emerging patterns and themes in the data (Hall & Stevens, 1991). While historically member checking has occurred at the end of the data collection process, current best practices suggest engaging in member checking as an ongoing process throughout data collection by asking interviewees to reflect on certain themes as they start to emerge (e.g. “Some other interviewees have said this, what do you think?”; Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Morse, 2015). Along with member checking, trustworthy interpretation can be ensured through dialogue among co-researchers (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), or peer debriefing (Morse,

2015). This collaborative approach can aid in both conceptual development and reflexivity, which will be further discussed below (Morse, 2015). I also engaged other colleagues in “critical and sustained discussion” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 69) throughout the data collection and analytic process (Morrow, 2007). First and foremost, I was in regular contact with my dissertation chair, discussing themes as they emerged in the data. I also engaged in conversation and reflection with other members of my dissertation committee and with trusted colleagues who have deep experience with domestic violence, including a three-person informal advisory board of senior clinicians who have extensive professional experience working with domestic violence, some of whom also identify as survivors. These conversations with colleagues held me accountable for rigorously engaging in the analytic process and attending to my own biases and blind spots, further discussed in the following section.

**Reflexivity.** Feminist methodologies, along with many other qualitative methodologies, recognize that the elimination of subjectivity is not a realistic goal for researchers, but rather, biases must be acknowledged and accounted for (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Reflexivity, or “self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness” (Rennie, 2004, p. 183) has been identified by various researchers as a critical aspect of trustworthy qualitative research (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Along with consulting with colleagues, as described above, a researcher may account for personal biases through constant self-reflection and memo-writing (Morrow, 2005). I wrote memos following each interview, addressing my initial reactions, reflections on participant responses, emerging themes, issues associated with reflexivity, and questions that arose for me during and immediately after the interview, and I continued to engage in memo-writing throughout the data analysis and manuscript writing

process (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Below, I discuss a few points of reflexivity that were particularly salient in the present study.

As a white person with socioeconomic and educational privilege *and* as a woman who has experienced self-doubt and been disbelieved and called “hysterical,” I expect that there were moments when I both saw and did not fully see my participants. I am not an IPV survivor, so I do not know what it feels like to be afraid of or manipulated by a partner. However, I do know what it feels like to have aspects of my judgment and reasoning questioned – particularly by men who hold power over me, and especially invoking my emotionality – and to feel self-doubt in response. I am also aware that my identities may also have limited my findings in ways that I do not even recognize. For instance, there may be aspects of my participants identities and experiences that they chose not to share with me, out of a sense that they could not trust me or that I might not understand. Please see the limitations section in chapter five for a further discussion of this point.

In this study, I was aware of how my motivations as a researcher played a role in the data analysis process. Throughout the analysis phase, I grappled with how broadly to define gaslighting and, among other factors, became aware that one of the motives that inclined me towards maintaining a broader definition was fear of “losing data” (e.g. if examples and stories that survivors had shared during their interviews did not count as gaslighting, they might not be included in the study.) This motive came from both a self-interested place, as an academic interested in substantive and interesting findings, but also from a place of wanting to honor my research participants by sharing their stories as fully and closely to their own versions as possible. I monitored and wrote memos about this personal bias throughout the process of determining how to define gaslighting and which data to use. To further clarify: The research



process began with a tentative outline of the two-part model of gaslighting, based on literature review and discussion with subject matter experts. Over the course of the study, participants' stories gradually confirmed, deepened, and expanded the definition, as did reflexive discussion among the research team and further consultation of the literature and with my dissertation committee, and advisory board. This iterative and reflexive process resulted in the two-part definition of gaslighting listed in chapter one, which states: (a) The harming partner directly and repeatedly, either by word or action, challenges the survivor's perceptions, memories, and/or core narratives and beliefs, such that (b) the survivor experiences self-doubt about what they perceive, remember, or believe.

My identity as a clinician was also salient and a point of reflexivity throughout this study. Through clinical work, I am practiced in listening, bearing witness, and stewarding trauma, and I hope that many of the interviews in this study provided some therapeutic value to participants. For instance, one survivor explicitly named that just knowing that other people had similar experiences to hers and that I was doing a whole study on it was relieving and validating. There were also moments where it felt appropriate, consistent with feminist research methodologies, to provide validation or psychoeducation to participants. For instance, near the end of one interview, the survivor I was speaking with expressed a fear that she was somehow to blame for continuing to attract abusive partners in her life. I told her that, for what it was worth, it did not seem to me that it was her fault, and I also normalized that this was a common fear among survivors, that I had come across many times before as both a clinician and researcher. Yet, throughout the interview process, I did my best to remain mindful that interviews are not therapy and to notice and manage my instincts to speak as a clinician, as they arose. Furthermore, I was aware that my clinical background could lead a participant to feel tempted to

express more vulnerability than they might share with a non-clinician. Therefore, it was particularly important for me to reflexively engage with the ways that I used my clinical skills during the interview process (Morrow, 2005a; Haverkamp, 2005). Through memo-writing and consultation with trusted colleagues and my dissertation committee, I have done my best to hold myself accountable for understanding and managing the influence of my various intersectional identities and roles on the research process.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Three overarching clusters of findings emerged from the data: Survivors described (1) the gaslighting process itself, (2) their long-term responses to gaslighting, and (3) factors that influenced their self-doubt, during the gaslighting process. Each cluster is listed as a separate heading, with categories in bold and codes italicized. See Appendix C for a table with the full list of clusters, categories, and codes. Throughout, the number of participants who endorsed a particular code is noted as “a few” (less than 4), “many” (4-7), or “most” (8 or more) participants. This way of describing the data can help to illuminate interesting and important patterns in the findings, without suggesting or misinterpreting quantitative generalizability of prevalence beyond this study’s sample (Sandelowski, 2001).

### **Cluster I: The Gaslighting Process**

The survivors in this study provided a thick and rich account of the gaslighting process, including (a) the tactics harming partners employed to challenge survivors’ core beliefs and perceptions, (b) the various domains that these tactics targeted, (c) the resulting domains of self-doubt that survivors experienced, (d) their varying degrees of self-doubt, and (e) and the harmful corollaries of self-doubt.

#### **Harming Partners Used a Range of Gaslighting Tactics**

Survivors in this study discussed the various tactics that their harming partners used to gaslight them. Most survivors said that their partner had *denied or falsely claimed that something had happened*. Survivors described partners insisting that they had never said something that the survivor remembered them saying or claiming that they had not been flirting with someone or cheating on the survivor, even when there was evidence to the contrary. In one instance, Joanne remembered her partner having a number of drinks in front of her at an event. Then, when she

expressed concern about him driving, he said to her “What are you talking about? I didn’t drink.” Fiona described learning that her husband had turned down a preschool spot for their daughter, even though he told her that she simply had not gotten in. Survivors also described their partners claiming that the survivor had never said something that they remembered saying, or they accused the survivor of behaviors they had not done, such as flirting with other people, cheating, or stealing money. In one case, a harming partner accused the survivor of exactly the same coercive controlling behaviors that he was engaged in.

Most survivors said that their partner had *mischaracterized them* as well, challenging fundamental ways that survivors understood themselves. Partners would belittle or dismiss their abilities and call them names, in many cases using this to deflect from the harming partner’s role in a conflict or abusive behaviors (e.g. blaming a survivor by saying “you are crazy” or “you just like being the victim.”) Ruth described that way that this barrage of insults wore her down over time:

It’s called suffering because when somebody, you know, kinda like beats that into your skull, your brain is kinda like trained to think that way because it’s like, wow, you know I’m being thrown this information every single day, to the point where he wants me to hear it, he wants me to know it, and he wants me to feel it.

Many survivors also described abusive partners pairing these other gaslighting behaviors with *coercion to adopt their perspective*. They used terms like “huge anger,” “raging,” “cruel,” and “bully” to describe their harming partners and shared examples of them yelling and threatening or using physical violence to manipulate survivors into acquiescing to their versions of reality.

Katie explained how this coercion forced her give up her own beliefs:

My boyfriend was always like threatening to kill himself, or hurt me, or hurt my family. So, it wasn't just like, you know, it was like real threats that were coming at me, where I was like, "Ok you're right, and I'm wrong," and I am going to have to sacrifice my mental stability if it keeps that stuff from happening.

Another tactic that a few survivors described their harming partners using to challenge their perceptions and understanding was *secretly manipulating the physical environment*. This included behaviors such as hiding the survivor's keys from her, unscrewing lightbulbs, unlocking doors, and removing or rearranging objects. Melody, who experienced this tactic particularly acutely in her relationship, even said that she later realized that her husband had staged a break-in in their home, where the glass from the shattered window fell outwards, as if it had been broken from the inside. After their separation, she caught him sneaking into her home to move objects around, and during the divorce process, "He was sending me things that I thought I lost, but he had it. And he was sending me pictures of it," making Melody realize that he had had objects she thought she had misplaced all along.

Most survivors said that their partner's gaslighting tactics even went beyond their relationship, *drawing in other people*. Some partners told survivors' children that they were bad mothers. Others attacked survivors' character or abilities in front of friends and family, accused them of doing things they hadn't done, denied abusive behavior, and told stories in ways that made the survivor sound like they were overreacting or at fault. According to Joanne, her husband would tell "whoever would listen" that she was "crazy" and making up things that weren't true. Many survivors said that their harming partners *drew formal systems* into the gaslighting, as well as friends and family. Some harming partners mischaracterized survivors or tried to make them look bad in front of a couple's therapist. Some made false claims about

survivors' parenting to Child Protective Services (CPS) or in court. Marilyn's husband told her she tripped over the dog, after pushing her down the stairs, and then later repeated this narrative in court, denying that he ever touched her, calling her a klutz and claiming that she falls all the time. Veronica's husband scratched himself up before the police arrived, following an assault where Veronica had had to defend herself, and he managed to convince the police that *she* had been the aggressor. Veronica was arrested for assault and battery, but her husband told the police, "I'm not going to press charges. She is psychotic. She is mentally ill," and tried to get her committed.

### **Gaslighting Tactics Targeted Multiple Domains**

Harming partner challenged survivors' memories, perceptions, core beliefs, or narratives in one or more domains. These domains can be understood as existing along a continuum of subjectivity, from concrete, objective facts like whether or not a specific event occurred on one end, to more subjective beliefs, like what skills or personality traits a person has, at the other end. One of the most pervasive gaslighting domains—also one of the most objective—endorsed by most interviewees, was *survivor's memory*. Harming partners challenged survivors' memory by accusing them of things the survivors knew they had not done, like cheating or stealing. Partners would also deny having done things that survivors saw them do, including drinking or flirting with other people. They claimed that the survivor had said something they didn't remember saying, or, in other cases, harming partners denied having said something that the survivor remembered them saying. This was sometimes used as a tactic to derail an argument or discredit a survivor's grievances, as Sophia described:

I would say, "Hey, you said this and that hurt me," and he would be like, "I never said that. What are you talking about? You're crazy. You are making this up for attention."

You know, all of that which is like, it gets you to basically question your own perception of reality and feel like you are losing your mind.

Some harming partners undermined survivors' trust in their own memory by hiding keys or moving objects around to make the survivor believe they had misplaced them. Marilyn's husband would even deny physical violence. On one occasion, he pushed her down a flight of stairs during a fight. She blacked out, and when she regained consciousness, he told her that she had tripped over the dog, a story that, dazed and confused at the time, she believed. It was only later that Marilyn remembered that he had been chasing her and pushed her.

Most survivors also described incidents where their harming partner did not so concretely challenge their memory of events but rather challenged their *interpretation of harmful or abusive behavior*. In some cases, harming partners pretended that they had not been acting in harmful ways, claiming that the survivor had misunderstood. For instance, Veronica described running away after her partner stood up abruptly and threateningly, but then he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm just going out to get the mail." One harming partner pretended he had not been on Craigslist looking for sex, another claimed that he had meant to send a picture of his penis to the survivor instead of someone else, when, based on context, this clearly was not true, and a third pretended to be in the hospital instead of with the person he was cheating on the survivor with. In other cases, harming partners attempted to rationalize or normalize abusive behavior. For instance, Ari's partner, who surveilled their text messages also made them look at his messages as well. That way, when Ari confronted him about his controlling behavior, he was able to sow confusion by retaliating that they were doing the exact same thing. Fiona described the way her husband rationalized his tendency to cut her out of decision-making for their family:

We would discuss something, and I thought we were on the same page, and then he'd turn around and do the exact opposite, but he wouldn't tell me. I would find out about it later. And then I would confront him, say, "Why did you do that?" And then I would get a lot of anger... and then it was that he was making the decisions and that I didn't know what I was doing.

He ended up convincing her that, because she was a stay at home mother, he could make decisions without her. In other cases, harming partners challenged survivors' interpretation by blaming them for their response to abusive behaviors. They would instigate fights or provoke survivors and then accuse them of overreacting, or they would get angry and blame survivors for having emotional responses or trauma reactions. Addie described this dynamic, explaining, "He would get mad and it would be—my anxiety is to blame... I was often too anxious, or I nitpick or complain too much." Katie described a similar dynamic of blame for her emotional responses: "When we would fight, and he would be verbally abusing me or whatever, just like calling me terrible names and making me feel horrible about myself when I would react. He would be like, 'You are turning this all around trying to make me feel bad.'" As will be discussed in more detail below, this led survivors to feel confused, apologetic, and to believe that they must be at fault for the fights or abusive behavior.

Along with challenging their interpretation of harmful behaviors, a few harming partners *challenged survivors' interpretation or understanding of other experiences*. For instance, multiple harming partners accused survivors of flirting with other people, when the survivors could not figure out what they had done that was flirtatious. Another harming partner told a survivor that an experience from a previous relationship that the survivor identified as rape was, in fact, not rape.



Along with challenging survivors' understanding of events and experiences, harming partners also undermined their core beliefs about themselves. For instance, many survivors said that their harming partners *challenged their mental status*. Particularly commonly, harming partners would tell survivors that they were "crazy." They would call survivors "crazy" to other people as well, and one even got friends and family to express concern about the survivor's mental health. One survivor's partner told her she needed to be on a "psych ward" and another told a survivor's friends that she should be on medication and that he "need[ed] to commit her." Marilyn described the way her husband tried to convince her that she had psychosis, saying:

'Of course you are crazy...oh my god, are you serious? Look what you did.' And then he would google it, 'psychotic, that is a psychotic event.' Now, when I have looked into it, when I was a little bit more into [therapy through a DV agency], I would read up on all these different facets of mental illness. Everything he was telling me was him!

Everything that he was saying to me was actually him.

Many harming partners also undermined survivors' fundamental understanding of themselves by *challenging their knowledge of their own traits*. Some attacked survivors' intelligence or competence, trying to convince them that they were stupid, lazy, ditzy, and naïve. Others insulted survivors' motivations or moral character, calling them spoiled, demanding, manipulative, attention-seeking, and narcissistic. Still others undermined survivors' appearance or sexuality, accusing survivors of being "whores," of being flirtatious or impure, or of being unattractive or ugly.

Harming partners also *challenged survivors' abilities in specific roles*, most commonly their abilities to perform family roles. A number of harming partners accused survivors with kids of being bad mothers. For instance, Ruth was staying in a homeless shelter with one child while

she was also pregnant with twins. She recalled her partner, who was the father but was living with and cheating on her with another woman, telling her, “You can’t give your kids a place to stay. You’re a failure. You can’t support them. You can’t provide for them, you’re a failure.” Another harming partner told the survivor’s children that she had abandoned them and didn’t care about them, after she divorced him. Survivor’s partners also accused them of failing at domestic duties, traditionally associated with wives, such as cooking and keeping the home clean. Marilyn described how her husband’s insistence that nothing she did was ever good enough came to dominate her whole life:

I would have his lunch made in a paper bag, like you know it had his name on it and my son’s name on it. And I’d be up till two in the morning just like, “Ok, well let me try harder. Let me make the lunch the night before.” And then the next day he’d be like, “You shouldn’t have put the mustard on the sandwich cause my sandwich was all slimy, and the bread was all mushy cause you put the mustard on last night.” ... Even if I prepared it and got it ready the night before and he is like, “Well you should have made it fresh in the morning before you go to work. Well you should’ve put the mustard on the side in a separate container.” ... And the more he said, the more I did more. I just kept doing more and more and worked harder and harder and harder Like it is like running a marathon, and then running it on your knees, and then running it on your hands and like, you know, you are crawling, like you can't run it anymore, and then when you get to the end, they hit you over the head with a hammer, like, “You didn't run the marathon right.” Like I was running a marriage marathon.

Similarly, Anna’s partner complained about her cooking and her sexual abilities directly to her and also embarrassed her by talking about these topics with friends and family. Melody’s partner

acted in controlling ways, would not explain why he was acting that way, and then convinced her that she just did not understand how romantic relationships were supposed to work, because she was younger than him and this was her first long-term relationship.

Harming partners attempted to undermine survivors' relationships with other people as well. Many survivors described their partners *challenging their value to other people*. In some cases, this took the form of general statements that no one else would want the survivor, no one liked them, or that specific people, like the survivor's children, did not love them. In other cases, the harming partner lied to the survivor, telling them that friends or family were talking about them behind their back or saying negative things about them. Fiona described this dynamic in her relationship:

A big problem was with especially friends, he would tell me opposite things that happened. So something would happen, [but] he would tell the story as something so different and opposite, and so it really did make me wonder a lot of times that he would say, "Oh you can't trust that person. They were talking about you. They said this about you," or you know... "They don't want to actually be your friend, they're not your friend."

### **Survivors Experienced Self-Doubt in One Or More Domains**

In response to the gaslighting tactics described above, all of the survivors in this study experienced self-doubt in parallel domains. Many survivors said they *experiencing self-doubt about their memory*. They described feeling confusion when their partners recalled events differently to how they remembered them or when they denied saying something or denied that a survivor had said something. Anna, whose partner accused her of cheating on him, began to wonder if he might be drugging her to make her forgetful and confused (though she knew he

could not actually have done so.) Melody began to feel disorganized and undependable because she thought she kept losing her keys and misplacing other items. Sophia, whose boyfriend did not believe her when she said that his friend had raped her, found herself questioning:

You know, why did I say that? It felt like I was lying... like maybe I'm confused and maybe I'm lying about his best friend assaulting me. And then I was like, "Maybe I'm lying about like this dude Terry like raping me." It really felt like I was like, like I should have not said that because it is not the truth you know.... It started to feel like I made this up for attention because I was angry at Larry and because I was fighting with Larry.

Marilyn even questioned her own memories of her husband yelling at her and physically assaulting her. Though, as time went on, she began to covertly record their fights on her phone, so she could go back and check later what the truth was:

I only remembered small pieces of it and then when I would listen to it a week later when my husband wasn't home. I would hide in the bathroom and I would listen to it, and I'm like, "Oh my god, he called me a pig...or a whore like three of four times." And he would say it over and over again, and then I would say, "Stop saying that, like stop calling me that," and he goes, "I never said that. I never said that." But he just said it. And I was like am I imagining this? And then the only time I realized it was like I recorded it, and I'm like, "Oh my god he said it three times," or "He said it four times," and I would say, "Stop, like stop," and he goes, "Stop saying the word 'stop'...Now you are being one of those crazy women."

Most survivors in this study also *experienced self-doubt about their interpretation or understanding of harmful or abusive behavior*. A number of survivors described accepting the narrative that they were "the problem" or to blame for all of the conflict or harm in their

relationships. One survivor whose husband was very critical of her described feeling like she could just never do anything right. Melody shared about the way her husband managed to convince her that she simply did not understand how relationships worked and had unrealistic expectations:

I was really confused about what love was. You know what was- what I mean- do I have it wrong?... I honestly thought that maybe, maybe something I put in my head that doesn't really exist. You know because- maybe this is what you do. Like this is how it works. Yeah, I fought with that for a long time, about what love is and how he twisted love.

Other survivors said they often wound up apologizing for things they later realized were not their fault, in their relationship, or accepting that they had provoked a fight because they were looking for attention. Sophia illustrated this experience:

Our fights usually would end with me like apologizing and being like, "You are right. I'm sorry." "Cause it wasn't even like me apologizing because I wanted the fight to be over with. These fights would last like hours and then at the end of it I would be like I would think like, "Oh he is so right, I'm just making a big deal out of this, and it is not worth fighting for, and sometimes I'm just crazy." I would be like, "Oh, you are right, I forget that I'm crazy." That is what I would say.

Ari would confront their partner about harmful behaviors, only to have him deny them or accuse them of the same behaviors. They explained how this impacted their self-trust:

It would make me feel like really confused with like, if this even bad stuff that I think, like, is this- is this even happening? Like am I like just making it all up? Or am I being

overly dramatic? And so I would really question of like even if it was like, even if it was happening at all let alone, if it was like unhealthy behavior.

As Ari described here, they found themselves questioning both their memory *and* interpretation of abusive behaviors. They shared that, on multiple occasions, they went into a conversation with the intention of breaking up with their partner, only to leave the conversation feeling confused, uncertain, and still in the relationship.

A few survivors also shared examples of *experiencing self-doubt about their interpretation or understanding of other experiences*, including Ari, who questioned whether they had been raped in a previous relationship, after their partner told them that their experience did not count as rape:

It took me a while to kind of label it with that term, and like I had to do like Title IX training when I went to college, and that was kind of when I recognized like, “Oh shit, this like thing happened.” And so it felt like really confusing for me [when my partner said it was not rape] because part of me is like, “No, I think that this was real. I think this is what happened.” And then the other part of me is like questioning myself and being like, “Am I wrong about this?” And so yeah, it was just really confusing.

Katie said that she did not question her memory, when her partner accused her of cheating on him, but she did begin to question if she was acting in a certain way that made him suspect her of cheating on him. She explained, “Obviously I knew I didn’t do anything. I tried to reconcile with that in my mind with like, wow, I’m doing something wrong if he’s believing this. So that’s how he got me to question my reality, when it got to the point where I would do anything I could to not talk to any guys at all.”

Survivors also discussed gaslighting tactics leading them to questioning fundamental beliefs they held about themselves. For instance, many survivors *experienced self-doubt about their mental status*. They described feeling like they were “crazy” or “losing my mind” when their memories or perception of reality did not align with their partner’s. One survivor believed her partner when he told her she was psychotic, and another survivor started going to therapy because her partner convinced her that she was depressed. Addie’s partner would tell her that she was too anxious and blamed her anxiety for his physical violence. She explained, “I felt like it was my fault. Like I thought I had made him hit me or made him trash the apartment. Like if I could have been less anxious or if I—yeah, that somehow it felt like very much my fault.” Veronica reflected, “They’ll have your head. They’ll totally, I think they’re out to take away your sanity.”

Along with mental status, many survivors *experienced self-doubt about their traits*. They described being convinced by their partners that they were a whore, that they were stupid, that they were fake and dishonest, spoiled and attention seeking, or manipulative. Survivors emphasized the role of repetition in inculcating these beliefs. For instance, Marilyn’s husband convinced her that he should handle all of the bills in their household, because he was smart, competent, and experienced, while she was naïve and didn’t know how to do anything:

When he would say or do something, he would say it like a thousand times. He’d be like, “I handle bills. I handle the bills. I know how to handle the money. You don’t.” Like he was relentless saying that, so it was like, it was almost like you would believe what he said.

Along with their general personality traits, many survivors also *experienced self-doubt about their abilities in specific roles*. In alignment with the gaslighting tactics described above,

survivors primarily questioned their abilities as wives and mothers. One survivor, whose partner contacted CPS about her, wondered why he would do that if there was not really something bad about her parenting. Another shared how doubting her abilities as a wife and mother led to constant embarrassment, which stopped her from reaching out to other people, because she worried that they would see how much she was failing in these roles.

Finally, in response to harming partners' attempts to convince survivors that other people did not like them, many survivors *experienced self-doubt about their value to others*. One survivor described feeling, at times, like no one liked her. Melody said that, because her husband would lie to her and pretend that other people were saying negative things about her behind her back, "I always feel like I didn't have any friends, I didn't have any support. And maybe, like maybe something's wrong with me that I'm-- if everybody's seeing the same things and I'm the only one. Like maybe it's me." Tilly described the way that her partner's lies about what other people thought of her took advantage of her natural tendency to seriously consider feedback that she receives from other people:

He would say like, "Oh my sister thinks you are—my sister doesn't want you to come on this trip because she is not sure about you." And then I started thinking like, "Oh my god, people don't like me. I've never had-- People usually like me. Someone that has not even met me doesn't like me!" Or he would say like, "My son is scared of you," and I'd start thinking like, "Oh my god," like I started wondering like, "Am I a bad person? I've never heard this or thought this or no one has ever—" It started scaring me because if someone tells you something, you would like— you typically would believe them that they're telling some sort of truth... It was just so insidious. It just creeps up on you and so twisted...If someone said like "hey... everyone is talking about how crazy you are," like



if you are a normal person, you just go along and listen to this and hear this and contemplate this and try to understand this. So that kind of thing was happening constantly toward the end.

### **Survivors Experienced Varying Degrees of Self-Doubt**

As they experienced self-doubt across these different domains, survivors also felt varying degrees of self-doubt, on a continuum from complete self-doubt to complete resistance. Most survivors experienced moments of self-doubt, confusion, *and* resistance at different points over the course of their relationships. For some, this varied by domain. For instance, some survivors resisted more “objective” gaslighting tactics, such as attempts to convince them that they had said or done something that they knew they had not said or done, yet they experienced confusion and doubt in the face of more “subjective” gaslighting tactics, such as attempts to convince them that they were overreacting or misinterpreting a situation. For other survivors, self-doubt varied over time. In general, survivors’ resistance increased towards the ends of their harming relationships, as they began to recognize harmful behavior and shift their perspectives on their partner or relationship. The following section provides examples of the range of experiences of self-doubt and resistance that survivors described in their interviews.

Most survivors endorse experiences of *fully adopting their partner’s narrative or version of reality*, at some point in the relationship. Some survivors simply described being so deep into the relationship or the abuse that it just did not occur to them to question or challenge their partner. These survivors described not even realizing that they could have their own voice or a separate opinion. Fiona explained, “So it really warped my world to think, to believe-- and at that time, I was believing what he was saying. That, you know, I thought he had my best interest, he would say that you know, he was always going to take care of me, and things like that.”

Similarly, Veronica said, “I was just like, I don’t know. Like I depended so much, I was so wrapped up in him... I didn’t know who I was. I lost myself. I devoted myself to a man that I had no clue really that this is what [harming partners] do.” Other survivors described family or friends’ attempts to help them see that “what he’s saying isn’t true,” but that they had adopted their harming partner’s narrative to such a degree that these counternarratives did not sink in or persuade them. A few survivors even went so far as to say that there was nothing that anyone could have said or done to convince them out of the gaslighting narratives that they had bought into.

Along with these experiences of fully adopting the harming partner’s narrative, most survivors also shared examples of *recognizing and resisting their harming partners’ narratives*. Some survivors talked about instances when their partner tried to convince them of something that simply was not credible, for instance claiming that they were not cheating on the survivor, when there was too much evidence to the contrary. Of course, these experiences were still distressing in other ways; Joanne, whose partner insisted on driving after she watched him drink, felt powerless and scared, even though she did not doubt her clear and recent memories of seeing him have multiple beers and shots of hard alcohol. Survivors also described the distress of “not standing up for myself” in these kinds of situations. Katie talked about how she would not admit to the lie that she was cheating on her partner, but she gradually began to believe that she must be doing something wrong or somehow be to blame for his suspicion about her cheating:

It was kind of like this twisted sense of someone just saying, “The sky is green, the sky is green, the sky is green,” and you are just like, “No it’s not,” like, “It’s not green, its blue!” But they won’t stop saying it. You are like, I don’t know what to do know. It is blue, but you are not going to stop, and you are really mad at me, and you are threatening

to hurt me, so OK I guess you're right. I don't know, but you're, right, trying to reconcile two realities... like I'm the reason why you think it is green. Like, ok, I'll try to change so then you can see the truth again.

Another survivor described the ways that gaslighting tactics in certain domains did not make her doubt herself because she had tangible accomplishments in those domains. For instance, when her partner would call her stupid, she reminded herself that she had a degree from a prestigious university.

Some survivors pointed to specific turning point moments, when they began to resist. One said she drew the line when her partner began insulting her to her child, as well directly to her. Similarly, Tilly said that hearing her partner lie about her child to other people was a clarifying experience: "When you hear something about yourself you are like, 'Wait, do I just have a warped perception of myself?' But when you hear something about your child, who you are a step away from, you are like, 'Wait, that is not true.'" Some survivors described a process of beginning to gather evidence for themselves, writing down what happened, so they could refer back to it later and remind themselves that "you are not crazy." As described above, one survivor even began covertly making audio recordings of her fights with her husband, so that she could go back and check later what actually happened. This was an important turning point in her relationship. Veronica, who was still in contact with her husband, even though they were divorced, simply described the way that she no longer fell for his gaslighting tactics, instead seeing them for what they are now: "I see all the forest *and* the trees."

In between these moments of complete self-doubt and complete resistance, most survivors also described experiences of *going back and forth about the validity of their partner's narratives* at some point in their relationship. They talked about beginning to apologize for

something their harming partner was blaming them for, only to step back mid-apology and realize that they had nothing to apologize for, or vice versa, moments of initially thinking, “I don’t think that’s how it happened,” but then beginning to wonder if they were misremembering.

Anna shared the following example:

He would lose his money, and he would accuse me that I took the money. And he would call his mother, he would call his sister, and he would call his friend, and he would tell them, “I have a thief in my house who stole my money.” And they would say, “Who is that?” And he would say me... I was shocked. I was shocked, and then one day I started to like checking in my purse, and maybe I did take his money somehow.

Survivors also talked about repeatedly going back and forth about the same domain of gaslighting over time. For instance, Ari, who tried multiple times to break up with their partner described a cycle where they would start each conversation with clarity about how their partner was acting in harmful ways, but would end up feeling confused and uncertain again by the end of the conversation. Sophia said that she would go back and forth, from week to week, sometimes thinking she was so lucky to have her boyfriend because no one else would “put up with my craziness,” and other times thinking angrily, “Why can’t I get out of this relationship?”

In general, survivors’ experiences of self-doubt in response to gaslighting tactics were not singular or monolithic across domains and time, but rather, survivor’s susceptibility to self-doubt varied depending on the topic and trajectory of the relationship.

### **Survivors’ Self-Doubt Led to Harmful Corollaries**

Regardless of their experiences of resistance, all of the survivors in this study experienced self-doubt at some point, and they reflected in their interviews on the negative effects of their self-doubt. First and foremost, many survivors discussed the *emotional distress*

that their self-doubt caused. Because they believed their partners' narratives about them, survivors described feeling "emotionally distraught" because they could not do anything right, "guilty" about being manipulative, or "angry" about being "crazy" or "born so fucked up and wrong" compared to other people. One survivor, who went back and forth between what she knew to be true and what her partner was trying to convince her, described feeling trapped and powerless throughout this process and like she was "walking on eggshells." Emotional distress took other forms as well: One survivor described "retreating" into herself, because her partner had convinced her that she was spoiled and demanding. Melody, whose husband staged a break-in in their own home, said she felt more afraid to be in their home because she believed his lie about the break-in.

Many survivors specifically pointed to the ways that their experiences of gaslighting and self-doubt led to *mental health problems*. When describing the impact of her harming partner's repeated insults and her corresponding self-doubt, Ruth shared:

It did a lot of damage. It did exactly what it was supposed to, as far as my mental health, and it didn't—you know like, now, my days—I have to relive it. I have to always fight for those good days. You know it's a lot. I have to go through a lot. I suffer. That's like the most real. That's the best way I can put it.

Other survivors specifically described their anxious and traumatic responses to self-doubt. One survivor recalled having a panic attack after their partner denied that their experience of rape was real. Another said that she continued to suffer from "extreme anxiety," associated with a fear that she was "crazy" and making things up. Another survivor said that she thought she was traumatized and had PTSD. A few survivors also described *physical health problems* caused by the gaslighting and self-doubt. Fiona, who continued to have contact with her harming partner

because of shared child custody, said that she would get emails from him, attacking her, and when she did, “Those thoughts stick in my mind of what he’s saying about me, and I have to remind myself that that’s not real, what he’s saying. I have to really push it away, out of my head. I do that a lot.” She explained that, because of the distress of these experiences, she is sometimes unable to eat or sleep. Joanne explained the way that gaslighting took a physical toll on her, leading her to “break down:”

When someone tells you that your parents don't like you and that your father abused you because you are an idiot and you are a loser and no one likes you. That was when, you know, every now and again I would you know break down, and had to just kind of—and I'd get chronic daily migraines. They are better now but with him they were awful because I couldn't take it, the trauma, and I would just be bedridden for three days. As well as migraines and being bedridden, she further described insomnia, caused by her self-doubt.

Along with experiences of emotional distress and health problems, many survivors shared that their experiences of self-doubt in response to gaslighting tactics made them *devalue themselves*. Survivors discussed feelings of worthlessness or “eating away” at their self-confidence. Katie described this devaluing of herself, explaining, “I think the biggest manifestation of all of the gaslighting and emotional manipulation is like shame... Something is wrong with me and I am bad, and anytime that there was any conflict always immediately blaming myself.” Anna named an even greater level of existential harm: “Oh, [it] affected me extremely deep, to a level where it is like no—I thought like, I'm no one. I don't have dignity, identity, or like, I'm a bad person. Like I'm a bad person and I'm not—I didn't have a worth or something like that, like I'm not worth it.”

Survivors' experiences of self-doubt influenced their relationships as well as their sense of self. A few survivors described the ways that their self-doubt made them *more dependent on others*. Melody, whose partner would hide things and move things around to make her feel disorganized and forgetful, described the way that this increased her sense of dependence on him in the relationship, "like I needed him," and how this even stopped her from pursuing professional goals of her own because she did not feel confident enough and instead relied on him. Leann also described loss of confidence in her ability to independently make decisions:

Well, I used to do so much. I mean, I used to have my own businesses before. I've worked—I used to work at, volunteer at the jail, volunteer at the church. I helped other people, like I—I helped with re-entry. I mean, what you did, helping people that didn't have means. I-- I had a lot of contact with a lot of different resources, and I was really good at pulling my resources together and helping, and, for the most part, I knew how to help myself at that point, and I was happy. And I was good at making decisions. I was a delegator. I mean, with four kids, you have to delegate. So, after being with him—after a while it was, even in my own decision-making was—I don't know how to do this stuff for myself anymore. I know how drive and write a check, but I don't feel confident in my ability to write a check anymore.

Similarly, Fiona said, "Before my relationship with him, I feel like I would make decisions and trust myself more. And now I think I do—I didn't ask people for their opinions on much before. I didn't want other people's opinions, but I think now I do that more. Just to try and validate and say—I think it's just a general not believing in myself or trusting in myself as much."

While some survivors felt more dependent in their relationships, many also talked about *not reaching out for support* because of their self-doubt. Survivors described not reaching out

due to embarrassment, because they believed the gaslighting narratives that they were “crazy” or a bad wife or mother. Others talked about not reaching out because they assumed that other people would also accept the gaslighting narratives. For instance, one survivor said that she feared if she told her family that she was worried about her memory or felt like she was going “crazy” that they would think she was just making things up or was on drugs. Another survivor whose partner blamed them for the problems in their relationship thought that others would blame them in the same way. As demonstrated in the various examples above, the self-doubt caused by gaslighting left survivors feeling confused, anxious, worthless, alone.

### **Cluster II: Long-Term Responses to Gaslighting**

The survivors who participated in this study reflected on their long-term responses to gaslighting after their relationships ended, namely their experiences of (a) lingering self-doubt and (b) regaining self-trust. All of the survivors interviewed for this study had left the relationship with their harming partner at least a year ago, though a few did still have regular contact (e.g. for shared custody or property reasons), and survivors described regaining self-trust to varying degrees, with some feeling a great deal of continued doubt, some articulating how they had regained self-trust, and others falling somewhere in between.

#### **Survivors Experienced Lingering Self-Doubt**

While none of the survivors in this study were still in harming relationships at the time of their interviews, they nonetheless described continuing to question or doubt themselves in various domains. A few survivors reported that they *continued to experience self-doubt about their memory*. Marilyn, whose husband pushed her down the stairs, described her hesitance to recount this and other instances of violence in court because her memory still was not “crystal clear” and she felt unsure. Sophia shared that she still lies awake in bed sometimes, replaying the



gaslighting narratives that her boyfriend convinced her of, thinking, “Oh, like I’m lying. I made this up. I’m attention seeking. I like to be the victim.” She said she still does not trust her own memory, turning instead to others for validation.

Many survivors also said that they *continued to experience self-doubt about their interpretation of events*, even after they were no longer in the harming relationship. They described times when, looking back on the harm that they experienced during their relationships, they still questioned their interpretation, wondering, like Tilly did, “Maybe it was me. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing.” Addie explained how hard it was to fully believe that she had not caused or brought the abuse on herself, even though she knew it was not true:

Parts of it feel like—there is a part of me that very much feels like, “Well like this is just like what happens. These are the relationships I have been in. I cause people to harm me, like I am just like—” and I am about to say this, and I know this is like a thing that survivors feel, um but like feeling like a magnet for trauma or feeling like I just get pulled into the vortex. So that part feels hard to always have distance from, like it’s not my fault that these things happened.

Other survivors described the way that lingering self-doubt affected their trust of their interpretation in new situations. One described being less decisive and more conflict-averse than she used to be. Another shared that she questioned her interpretation of a recent sexual assault that she had reported to the Title IX office at her university.

Survivors continued to question their beliefs and understanding of themselves as well, following the gaslighting. For instance, a few survivors *continued to experience self-doubt about their mental status*. One survivor said she still felt “crazy” sometimes, particularly in romantic relationships, where she described having a hard time setting boundaries and feeling like her

reactions were “not okay.” Sophia said that, when minor conflicts would arise with friends, she would feel intense anxiety and return back to thinking:

I'm not normal, and everyone else is normal, and I'm just crazy. I'm just crazy... it's kind of like ‘Oh [participant’s name], you forgot that you were this way, and you forgot that you are this type of person.’ And so it is like I kind of am like, ‘Remember that you are this type of person sometimes, and you, you know, are crazy.’ And I’m like, “It is ok that you are crazy. Just remember try to keep it together.’

In the face of these lingering effects of gaslighting, many survivors discussed *developing strategies for managing self-doubt and its impacts*. Some described using external strategies, like one survivor who goes back to reread her notes and remind herself she is not crazy. Marilyn, whose partner would hide keys, said she has a clicker now for finding her keys, because otherwise she would have panic attacks and it would “bring me back to that place” if she ever lost her keys. Other survivors described internal strategies, like self-affirmation, pushing away unwanted thoughts, or reminding themselves that gaslighting narratives are not true. Marilyn described the immense effort and energy involved in managing self-doubt:

It is a struggle. I mean, I feel like a drug addict or like I have an addiction. It is like every day I have to manage this circumstance and the abuse that happened to me, like every day. Almost like—when I hear people that are—everyday they have to—it is a conscious thing to stay clean or lose weight or whatever. It is a conscious thing that I can't let this person invade my space. It is a lot of work, it is exhausting sometimes. But then it is real, and sometimes I have to look at it like, I have to, every now and then, review some of my recordings and like a little check, like this really happened, this

person—this really happened. This was really true. I'm not crazy. Sort of, I have to remember it—remember it enough so that it does not impact my day.

### **Survivors Regained Self-Trust**

While many survivors still experienced self-doubt, even more survivors (and overlapping with those who still doubted) shared experiences of rebuilding their sense of self-trust in various domains. A few survivors said that they had *regained self-trust in their memory*. They described looking back with clarity now on moments where they had previously experienced doubt, for instance knowing with confidence now that a harming partner had been lying. One survivor discussed a sense that, even though she still doubted her memories, they were getting clearer over time. Melody, whose husband would hide and rearrange objects, said she no longer felt forgetful and disorganized, once she realized that he had been hiding things.

Many survivors also said that they had *regained self-trust in their interpretation or understanding of experiences*. They described looking back on their experiences of gaslighting with more clarity now, recognizing that their experiences were real, and they were not to blame for them. Ari said:

So definitely my perspectives have shifted, and I definitely recognize that he was a toxic shitty individual that was being extremely manipulative and controlling, and it wasn't my fault that that was what happened. And also that, yes, these things did happen, and I didn't make it up, and it was really terrible. Yeah, so definitely things have shifted quite a bit since then.

Other survivors described trusting their interpretation of ongoing interactions with their harming partners who, for instance, they still shared custody or property with. Lashay provided a recent

example of a time her harming partner, who had lied throughout their relationship, called her after spending time with their kids and how her perspective on his lying had changed:

He goes to tell me how my daughter told him that she didn't like my new boyfriend, and it was just something about him and these are his words: It's that he knows him and my daughter have been through a lot, him and me, but she misses him and wants him to come home. So, we ended the phone conversation and I called my daughter and said, "Did you say this?" and I'm laughing, because I know she didn't say this, and I talked to her. We talked. So I'm laughing, and when I get done telling her, she's laughing because she's like, "Mama." I'm like, "I know, but I still had to ask." Like, I know he's been lying.

Other survivors talked about doubting themselves less in other situations, outside of the harming relationship. Marilyn shared examples of being more assertive in a range of interactions and standing up for her professional expertise, where she might not have in the past. Anna described the impact of developing greater self-trust in all of her relationships:

I started to believe that I have a right to my opinion, and if this person do not like what I said, then that is okay with me. Before will be to the point where I didn't say anything. It was like emotional abuse with friendships. It was like I can't even name what was before. It was just like such a disaster.

This perspective represented a marked change for Anna, who had described feeling like she had no voice at all, during her harming relationship.

Finally, survivors expressed greater self-trust in their understanding of themselves, since the gaslighting relationship ended. A few said they had *regained self-trust in their mental status*, simply stating that now "I know I'm not crazy." A few also said that they had *regained self-trust in their abilities in specific roles*. They said, where they had questioned their abilities before,

they now knew, “I’m a good cook,” or “I’m a good mother.” Ruth described the ways her thinking had changed about her parenting:

Now I don’t think like that anymore. Now I’m doing my therapy and my self-work and I know that—that I am a good mother and because sometimes I do beat myself up – we are our worst critics, so there are some days where I’m just like damn, and I feel like that but, I’ve gotten better because now I do feel like I’m a good mother and you know I’m doing everything that I need to be doing up until this point, you know, so.

Ultimately, most of the survivors in this study claimed that they had, to varying degrees, regained self-trust in domains where they had doubted themselves during the gaslighting process.

### **Cluster III: Ecological Influences on Survivor Self-Doubt**

Across interviews, survivors described a range of different ecological factors that influenced the gaslighting process, either contributing to the self-doubt that they felt in the face of gaslighting tactics or contributing to their ability to resist self-doubt. They shared about (a) individual factors, (b) interpersonal factors related to their harming partners, (c) interpersonal factors related to their social support networks, (d) interpersonal/institutional factors related to system players, and (e) ideological factors.

#### **Individual Factors**

Survivors talked about the ways that their individual traits and experiences, as well as those of their harming partners, contributed either to their self-doubt or their ability to resist self-doubt. For instance, many survivors said that the *lingering impacts of past trauma* contributed to their susceptibility to self-doubt, in the face of gaslighting tactics. They described abusive relationships from their childhoods that planted seeds of self-doubt in specific domains. As Anna explained:

When I was called certain names, you know, it is like an echo which kind of connects with the childhood, and it is like, I started to believe it—yes this is true... Again, I'm the one who is not good. Again I'm the one who is irresponsible, and I'm the one who is guilty. I have had that before many times, so I started thinking it was normality. I was like, that's normal and that should always be normal at the time.

Addie described a similar history:

I had, I'd say, some emotional abuse growing up in childhood and adolescence, and then the abusive relationship in college, and then I wouldn't call it abusive but I would say toxic relationship at the beginning of graduate school, and then this abusive relationship. So, I think it's like, I already had the foundation laid—like if somebody says it's your fault or you're being anxious or you're reacting in a certain way, it's just like I automatically believe it and kind of shut down. So that's kind of how that happened in that relationship I think.

One survivor said that abuse and neglect she experienced in childhood made particularly vulnerable to self-doubt about her relationships and value to other people, which her harming partner exploited. Ari described the ways their mother would minimize and deny their memories of abusive behavior, which increased their vulnerability to mistrust their memories in romantic relationships too:

Well I think that definitely, like I said, kind of like how my mom would just kind of minimize and deny, so it was so easy to kind of like—to kind of question my own reality and question my own perceptions and be like, "Is this even happening?" And so I think it was pretty easy for that stuff to kind of be evoked and brought back up, like in future

relationships and stuff cause—definitely having a lot of that questioning myself and questioning whether things actually happened or not.

Ari also said that their trauma history generally contributed to dissociation and memory issues that made it harder to trust themselves. Multiple survivors also described traumatizing experiences of psychiatric hospitalization where they had not been fully lucid—either due to psychotic symptoms, medications, or repressing traumatic memories—and the way that these traumatic hospitalizations increased concerns that their memories were fallible or that their perceptions were faulty. Sophia explained how knowing that that she has suppressed traumatic memories around her hospitalization contributed to self-doubt:

So whenever like I'd fight with Larry about stuff, and he would like—and he would be like, “I never said that,” or like, “What are you talking about? I never did that”—'cause it was usually like, I would be like, “You said this, and it made me really sad. You did this and made me really sad when you did this.” He would be like, “What are you talking about? I never said that. I never did that.” And then, so I would be like, “Oh ok, like he might be right 'cause, you know, you like to suppressed things, and you like to like—like, you like to make up memories in your head,” so I would be like, “Ok, maybe I'm just making up a memory in my head, and he didn't actually say that or do that, or I misinterpreted it, misremembered what he said or what he did.”

A few survivors also named *physical vulnerabilities* as a factor that contributed to self-doubt, in the face of gaslighting tactics. Multiple said that being pregnant made them doubt their memories. Anna recalled, “I thought that, yes, he is right, and probably I don't remember, or maybe I was blaming my hormones because I'm pregnant.” Lashay said that earlier in her relationship, she questioned her memory because she thought she had “pregnancy brain,” but

later, when she was no longer pregnant, she realized her partner was simply lying to her. Finally, Melody said that her chronic migraines contributed to susceptibility to doubting her own memory, because she knew that she did not always remember things when she had a bad headache.

Harming partners also had individual characteristics that made survivors trust them more, and therefore trust *themselves* less. This was particularly the case for the many survivors who described their *harming partners as charming, charismatic, or well-liked*. For instance, survivors said their partners were involved in their churches and communities, brought plants as gifts to their neighbors, had large social circles, and were well-respected in their workplaces. These factors particularly influenced survivors' self-doubt about their perception or interpretation of harmful behaviors or belief that they were to blame for the abuse. Melody said:

Everybody loves him you know. He's good to his family, he loves his mom. You know, he takes care of his family. What's wrong with me that he can't treat me like that? So, that's where it came from, because he was great to everyone else, that I felt like it was me because why can't he, you know, if he's great with everyone else, I'm the only person he's not treating nicely or loving or caring, then maybe it is me. So for a long time I maybe thought it was me.

Addie echoed this sentiment:

People generally liked him. Like my family really liked him. My friends really liked him. They didn't see any of that fighting stuff. So, I think that has made it a little harder... I was like, well, they like him and like I don't know. Yeah so, I must be wrong, and he must be right, and I am not the one—I am the one who is causing stuff. And it is my fault that things are happening.



While the individual factors described above exacerbated survivors' self-doubt in the face of gaslighting tactics, survivors also named factors that contributed to their ability to resist self-doubt. At the individual level, many survivors shared that, over the course of their relationships, they began to *learn about or identify abusive relationship dynamics*. They described reading, doing research, and joining groups where they learned about DV. Ari explained how this changed their perspective on their relationship:

You know, I've done a lot of kind of research into it, and I've done a lot of work on—you know with the therapist and also now with like the DV advocate, right. I like, I feel like I know a lot—a lot more about it, and I know that it can be like really, you know, that people that are literally—part of the cycle of abuse and the power and control is like kind of minimizing and pretending it didn't happen, or ignoring, or things like that, and so I definitely like now kind of look back on it and I'm like, “Yes, that was a really unhealthy relationship.”

Melody said that she began to realize during her divorce that abusive relationships did not necessarily involve punches and black eyes, and Katie described the validation and recognition she felt when she first learned the term “gaslighting:”

I think when “gaslighting” was phrased as a form of manipulation to basically get you under someone's control by doubting your own perception of reality, it was like—it's just like—it's like reading a description of your life, and it's just like, “Oh yeah! Of course! That's me.” So, it just feels like, “Ugh, you are describing what happened to me,” and it felt very relieving of like, “Oh my god, there is a name to this.” And also validating or just kind of vindicating of, “Oh my god this, is a real thing—kind of like a form of brain washing or mind control or something.”

Particularly for survivors who had been gaslit into believing that they were misinterpreting harmful behaviors in their relationship, greater education and awareness of abusive relationship dynamics provided a validating perspective.

### **Interpersonal Factors: Harming Partners**

Along with the individual factors that exacerbated vulnerability to self-doubt, survivors described their partners using coercive control strategies, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to maintain and deepen survivor self-doubt. Most survivors in this study reported *threatened or actual physical violence* in their harming relationships. The physical violence ranged from slamming doors, throwing, hitting, and breaking objects, and pushing survivors to punching and choking survivors or pushing them down the stairs. Partners threatened to shoot, stab, or kill survivors. Multiple survivors in this study ended up in the hospital at some point, due to injuries sustained from their partners' violence. Anna's partner indirectly physically harmed her by locking her in the basement without food or water, while she was pregnant, and leaving her there for long periods of time, which made her feel "like an animal" – merely focused on survival. He also hit her in the head, leading her to wonder if she had sustained concussion or developed memory issues because of the violence. Indeed, multiple survivors described the kinds of violence that could lead to traumatic brain injuries (TBIs.) Addie's partner choked her and pushed her down the stairs during a fight, and she remembers feeling afterwards that it was her fault for making him so angry.

Many survivors also described *sexual violence*, including non-consensual sex and sex that was physically violent. For instance, Addie, who had a prior history of sexual trauma, had a partner who would ignore her when she tried to set boundaries and then would blame her for being overly sensitive. Riva said, "Like he would hit me during sex. There would be instances of

me saying ‘no’ over and over again.” She had a history of self-injury, and after her partner found this out, he tied her to a chair and cut her during sex. Riva described feeling crazy for “letting” these things happen to her.

Harming partners engaged in a range of abuse tactics to make survivors feel stuck or trapped. For instance, many survivors reported that their partners engaged in *surveillance* tactics. They would read survivors’ mail and text messages, listen in on phone calls, try to access email accounts, go through call and texts logs to verify who survivors had been talking with, follow them places, and show up unannounced or call survivors repeatedly to check-up on them. Melody described the confusion that she felt in response to her husband’s surveillance: “And sometimes he would just pop up, and it was him, I guess, not trusting me – thinking somebody was there because I was all the way there by myself... But he could never tell me why he was trying to reach me, and then we would get into these arguments and he would make me feel like I didn’t know how to be in a relationship.”

Many harming partners also controlled survivors through *financial abuse*, for instance insisting on handling all of the family’s finances, sabotaging the survivor’s attempts to find or keep a job, or otherwise keeping the survivor completely financially dependent on him. Tilly’s partner convinced her to spend all of her savings on a new house, which she later found out only had his name on the title. Joanne, whose husband left her unemployed and with substantial debt, described how trapped she felt: “I felt completely like up to my neck in concrete.” Most harming partners also used *isolation* to further control survivors. Sometimes isolation tactics were overt, like hiding a survivor’s phone so she could not call her sister, or calling a survivor while she was with her friends and insisting that she talk with him instead. Other times, the isolation was subtle, like telling a survivor that he did not like her friends, so she spent less and less time with them,

or gradually spending more time with his family and less time with hers. Fiona described how her husband convinced her to move to another state, away from all of her friends and family, which she recognized in retrospect was a way of isolating her, though she did not know at the time.

Harming partners further controlled survivors by causing them emotional distress and diminishing their self-esteem. Many harming partners would *demean survivors' worth* by calling them names or humiliating them. This included cursing at survivors and a calling them names, like “bitch”, “pig”, or “whore.” Survivors’ partners called them worthless, and Ruth said her partner would tell her that she should kill herself because the world would be better off without her. Her partner would also make fun of her body, particularly after she had children, and she recalled an incident when he demeaned her by buying her a milkshake but then immediately throwing it in the trash. He would also call her and make her watch him perform sexual acts with another woman. Anna, an immigrant, whose partner called her worthless, told her she deserved to be deported. Many harming partners created distress by threatening or actually *harming others*, including survivors’ children and families. Ruth’s partner threatened to go to her child’s school with a gun. Lashay’s beat her up and kidnapped her children on multiple occasions. Survivors also shared stories of their partners threatening their families, like Marilyn, who recalled:

Like he would threaten me divorcing him like, “I’m going to get you. I know where you live. I know everything about you. I know your family. I know where everybody lives. I’m going to hurt somebody. You mess with me, you are messing with the wrong guy.” He was so intimidating like very intimidating.

Many harming partners confused or distressed survivors by punctuating abusive behaviors with *over-the-top attention or affection*. Some survivors used the term “love-bombing” and described relationships beginning with “intoxicating” flattery and praise, so that the survivor was “hooked.” Others described a whiplash push and pull dynamics, where harming partners would reel survivors back in with affection after abusing them. Veronica described this dynamic: “I kept giving him chances... He tries to pull you back in again. And then when they get you, then they want to throw you away again. So, they’re like using you as a toy and it’s awful.” Katie explained that the “love-bombing” at the beginning of her relationship made her more attached to her partner, trusting and believing him more than she might otherwise.

Finally, through various abusive behaviors, many harming partners *triggered extreme emotional reactions* in survivors, which only contributed to their sense of being “crazy.” Survivors described feeling anxious, developing nightmares, paranoia, panic attacks, and wanting to die. Sophia said that the confusion and distress caused by her relationship was so bad that, “it felt [like] my brain was about to crack open and fall apart.” Lashay said, “I didn’t *think* I was going crazy; I *was* going crazy!” A number of survivors echoed this sentiment, that their own emotional responses made them feel that were going crazy. Katie described feeling “hysterical” and crying a lot. She remembers believing, “‘Oh, I’m unstable.’ Like I thought I for sure had bipolar disorder because I was so up and down, and I felt like I couldn’t—like something was wrong with me.” Addie recalled that her partner would “shut down” during fights, a dynamic which drew her into being more reactive and “acting crazy.” While none of the survivors in this study explicitly named the full picture, one can see how all of these different layers of abuse— including head injuries, feeling completely trapped, life-threatening fear, a

sense of worthlessness, and a rollercoaster of extreme emotions—could all contribute to survivor’s vulnerability, confusion, and doubt, in the face of gaslighting tactics.

### **Interpersonal Factors: Social Supports**

Along with interpersonal factors between themselves and their partners, survivors also described the ways that social support networks influenced their self-doubt or resistance to gaslighting. Most survivors said that *family and friends going along with gaslighting narratives* contributed to their self-doubt. Survivors who experienced gaslighting around their interpretation of abusive behaviors doubted themselves even more when friends and family continued to stand by the harming partner. They described how their partners had other people “fooled,” how family would continue to support them even when they learned about abusive behavior, and how friends continued spending time with harming partners, after the abusive relationship ended. Lashay’s friend even told her “you’re tripping,” when the survivor described what was happening in her relationship. These kinds of experiences led survivors to think, “It’s something about me” or “something was wrong with me.” Katie said that, when her parents responded to the realization that she was in a harmful relationship by fighting with and yelling at her, it deepened her sense that “I am the bad person.” Family and friends contributed to self-doubt in other domains, as well. Joanne experienced self-doubt in particular about her value to other people, which was only reinforced when family members did not stand up for her when her husband was mean to her in public or when they took his side in the divorce. Another survivor, whose partner convinced her that she was bad mother, also doubted her abilities in this role when her partner’s mother echoed the same insults.

At least as often as they contributed to survivors’ self-doubt, family and friends contributed to their ability to resist self-doubt. Most survivors shared examples of *family and*

*friends providing valuable counter-narratives to gaslighting.* Survivors said that that sisters, close female friends, and others in their lives provided validation by affirming that survivors were good mothers, were not overreacting or making things up, and really had experienced harmful behavior. Marilyn shared a powerful story about how she reached a turning point in her relationship with her husband when her sister witnessed the gaslighting first-hand. She had been getting ready for an important interview one morning, and he had hidden her keys, as he had done many times before, to disorient her:

He was trying to make me late and trying to make me off-kilter, so I called my sister and I'm like, "Oh my god can you come to the house?" And then like Dennis started yelling at me, and then she ended up coming to the house, and he was like yelling at me, and then I like—she came in the door, and I was like you know arguing with him, like I almost became like the aggressor, and I'm like, "Stop it!" and he goes, "Look, she is going to assault me," like to my sister...and she is like, "No, you cornered her," because she had heard the phone conversation that happened prior to that, 'cause I had put the phone down, and I forgot. I didn't realize it was still on, and she could hear us fighting, and he was cornering me, and I'm like, "Stop it. Don't touch me. Get away from me." She heard like a little of an altercation. And so I just feel like that's when I started to let her in, but then I was afraid for her safety, you know. She said—she kept saying, "Where are the keys?" and he goes, "I don't know," and my ex-husband made it out like I lost them. And she said, "Dennis you are not going to con me. You can con my sister, but you are not going to con me. This is ridiculous. Stop it. Get her keys. This is crazy." And then he goes, "Oh look, they are right over there," or like, I think he grabbed them from somewhere and, "Oh, they are underneath the mail, like what are you—you couldn't see

them? Are you blind?” And so he definitely—it was almost like he tortured me, like he would emotionally torture me with things like that. So that was like an incident that—then my sister started to get a little bit more involved.

Other survivors described the ongoing importance of having friends and family validate their experiences and perspectives, because they still struggled to trust themselves. Sophia talked about seeking validation and support from friends, when she worried that she was lying or making things up for attention:

It is so much more helpful hearing someone other than myself try to convince me that. Cause when I try to convince myself that, it is hard because I like don't trust my judgement, and sometimes I don't trust my memory, but the only thing I do trust is the feeling I felt in those moments where it was just, “This is wrong. This is wrong. This shouldn't be happening right now,” and so like, reliving those experiences with people that I trust and hearing them like say back to me like, “No what you—you had the right to feel scared, and you had the right to feel upset,” it is like really reassuring ‘cause I don't trust myself. Like I don't trust myself. But I do trust my friends, so yeah.

Many survivors also said they felt validated when they *recognized that others have had similar experiences*. They described attending support groups, joining online communities, and meeting friends-of-friends who had been in similar kinds of harmful relationships. Tilly said that when she sees other people post about experiences like hers in online groups, she thinks, “Ok, that is what I'm going through, and this is real. That helps me to trust myself, if that makes sense.” Ruth, who was a member of a support group for DV survivors said of her support group experience, “It makes you feel really good, like oh god, like someone else had experienced this, and I'm not just crazy.” A number of other survivors echoed this sentiment, that recognizing



shared experiences with other survivors made them feel less “crazy.” One survivor even said that finding out about the present study was validating because it was an acknowledgement that her experiences were not only real but common enough that they were worth researching.

### **Interpersonal/Institutional Factors: System Players**

During and after their experiences of gaslighting, survivors also had interactions and relationships with system players who influenced their self-trust. A few survivors shared that they felt heightened self-doubt when *a therapist or advocate went along with gaslighting narratives*. Tilly described feeling unsupported by a marriage counselor and how this made her question, “Maybe there is something wrong with me that I’m not aware of, or maybe I have a warped perception of this.” Melody shared an example of her husband subtly riling her up in front of their therapist, to make her look bad:

I think one of the things that—that made me question myself more was, we did have therapy, and the way that he is around people, he’s really manipulating. So I’m in therapy with him, and I’m so mad, and I’m angry, and he’s so nice and polite, and he’s listening, and he’s like—he knows how to wait his turn. He’s showing a lot of self-discipline and, you know, and then I’m in there, and I’m just like—like, you know, he would have a way of doing things that he knew irritated me, but no one else would see. And so he’d walk away looking like, “I don’t know what’s wrong with her,” and I’m just like mad, like a mangy dog, like I have rabies or something. And so, that made me question myself and even if I—and maybe something’s wrong with me because even the therapist would look at me like, “You’re gonna have to, like, use your inside voice.” ‘Cause I’d be yelling and screaming because I’d be so—I was just so frustrated.

One of the primary gaslighting narratives in Melody's marriage was that she was misinterpreting her husband's behavior because she just did not have a good understanding of what was normal and expected in relationships. So when their therapist also did not notice him riling her up and suggested that the survivor needed to calm down, it only served to further inculcate her self-doubt.

A few survivors also said that *police went along with gaslighting narratives*, contributing to their self-doubt. Melody, the same survivor whose husband made her look like a "mangy dog" in front of their couple's therapist, also described calling the police on multiple occasions when she felt unsafe, even though there had been no physical violence. She explained that, at the time, she was not familiar with the concept of psychological abuse and could not explain what she was feeling, so when the police showed up and said, "He's not touching you. He didn't touch you. What's the problem?" this contributed to her confusion and sense that it was her interpretation of the relationship that was mistaken. As described above, Veronica spent the night in jail after her husband assaulted her but then framed her for assaulting him. He told the police, "Oh, I'm not pressing charges because she is mentally ill and unstable." Veronica said that she questioned her mental status even more when the police responded to this by offering to connect her to mental health services, simply going along with her husband's suggestion that she was "mentally ill" or "unstable."

On the other hand, many survivors also shared that system players contributed to their ability to resist self-doubt, for instance when *therapists and advocates provided valuable counter-narratives to gaslighting*. Survivors described receiving validation from therapists, counselors, CPS workers, DV advocates, and Title IX officers. These validating interactions increased their self-trust, whether it was through reassurance about their parenting, recognition of

abuse dynamics, or reminding survivors that they were not to blame for their experiences of harm. For instance, Sophia, whose boyfriend would accuse her of seeking attention or playing the victim and who still struggled with self-doubt, said, “I didn’t really put the connections together until my therapist was like, ‘Well, maybe you feel this way because someone was consistently telling you that you were this type of person in the past.’”

### **Ideological Factors**

At the ideological level, survivors described a range of negative social messages that they brought into their harming relationships that influenced their susceptibility to self-doubt. They reported having received these messages from their families of origin, peers, religious communities, and popular culture. Most of all, most survivors endorsed *social messages about gender*. They talked about trusting their harming partners—who were all men—because they had been brought up to listen to the “man of the house” or believed that they were supposed to be submissive or obey their husbands. Addie described having grown up observing misogyny in their family of origin and saying that this contributed to a sense that, “This is how relationships are. This is how women are subservient and men have the final say, and man’s word goes.” Heather shared that she felt like her husband was trying to turn her into a “stay-at-home wife from the 50s” and that she ended up falling into this role, deferring to all of his decisions. Social messaging around gender roles also affected survivors whose partners tried to convince them that they were to blame for the abusive behavior in their relationship.

Survivors describe the ways that gendered “victim blaming,” “rape culture,” and “toxic masculinity” contributed to their susceptibility to accept that they were at fault for the harm they experienced. Ari, who currently identifies as gender nonbinary but said that they identified as a cisgender woman for most of their life, including during the harming relationship, explained that

their socialization to blame women made it “hard to kind of combat those messages and kind of not blame myself as much” when their partner tried to convince them that they were at fault. In a similar vein, Addie, who identified as queer and whose harming relationship had been an open relationship, described growing up in a religious family where she was often depicted as the rebellious one. When her partner tried to convince her that she was at fault for his abusive behavior, she was more susceptible to believe this because she was accustomed to hearing that her identities and lifestyle were to blame for her problems.

Along with social messages about gender, survivors also described the way that other internalized social messages contributed to their susceptibility to doubt themselves in their harming relationships. A few described *social messages about age and experience*. For instance, Marilyn’s husband invoked these messages by convincing her that he was more competent to handle the family’s finances than she was because he was older and more experienced. He told her:

“I can do anything, and I’m older than you. I have lots of experience.” So, you know, he just painted like this picture of him being this grand human being, and even though I probably had, you know, more than he did, he just had to control me and put me in my place, like put me down.

A few survivors also described *social messages about education level or socioeconomic status*. Melody’s husband invoked education level, along with her family’s history of addiction and incarceration, to claim authority and credibility about how relationships worked:

Education-wise, I didn’t have a degree. I didn’t go to college. And my family background, like I said, a lot of family members have like—they’re in recovery, have

addictions, in and out of jail, so I always would feel like trying to make sure that he didn't see me like that.

She also remembered doubting herself because her family was poorer than his, and she believed that this gave him more authority than her.

Anna, who was undocumented, also described the way that *social messages about immigration status* contributed to her sense of self-doubt and her harming partner's authority in the relationship, explaining that, as an undocumented immigrant, she had felt that she did not have a voice or deserve any respect. Finally, Sophia, a half-Asian, half-white woman, shared how *social messages about racial identity* influenced her self-doubt because, "I see other suppressed groups and minorities struggle more than I do. It feels like I'm making things up so I can have like a struggle story." This contributed to her susceptibility to believe her boyfriend, when he accused her of being manipulative and attention-seeking.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In mainstream media, gaslighting has become an increasingly common word, spanning self-help books (Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2018), popular memoirs (Machado, 2019; Westover, 2018), and even political discourse (Carpenter, 2018). The field of philosophy has recently taken up the challenge of defining gaslighting and locating it in a broader literature on epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Spear, 2019, 2020; C. A. Stark, 2019), and the medical, mental health, and IPV fields have begun to acknowledge its centrality to dynamics of psychological abuse. For instance, the CDC now includes gaslighting in its definition psychological aggression (Breiding et al., 2015).

However, the horse has gotten ahead of the cart: There is still lack of clear consensus about what gaslighting even *is*, and only a miniscule number of peer-reviewed studies have empirically examined gaslighting in IPV: One, a sociological interview study, specifically illuminated how gaslighting in IPV fits into broader social forces, but did not delve deeply into survivors' internal experiences of gaslighting or its ramifications (Sweet, 2019). Another recent psychological study developed and validated a measure of gaslighting, based on a sample of Pakistani women, providing a valuable starting place for a two-factor framework, but one that is not well grounded in a rigorous definition or theory of gaslighting (Bhatti et al., 2021). Besides these, a couple of recent dissertations have also addressed gaslighting in IPV: One identified personality traits that were correlated with gaslighting in a small sample, using an un-validated measure of gaslighting, and without substantive theoretical rationale (Hightower, 2017), and, in another mixed methods dissertation of covert abuse tactics, the ten participants in the qualitative portion of the study endorsed gaslighting as one of the abuse tactics they had experienced (Burnett, 2020). Beyond these studies that explicitly address gaslighting in IPV, fragmented,

near-accounts from the psychological abuse literature have begun to delineate what it looks like and how it harms survivors (Lammers et al., 2005; Marshall, 1999; Sleutel, 1998; P. H. Smith et al., 1995). Yet, even taken together, this body of empirical literature barely scratches the surface of how gaslighting unfolds in intimate relationships and effects survivors. There is desperate need for more rigorous, empirical research on gaslighting, to catch up with the snowballing public discourse about this phenomenon.

Using the sparse literature described above, chapter two delineates what gaslighting in IPV *might* look like. However, the survivors interviewed for this study have provided the first empirical, systematic, and detailed account. Along with supporting and confirming the tentative descriptions of gaslighting from prior literature, participants' stories deepened these formulations. Survivors in this study highlighted the variety and complexity of gaslighting experiences, varying in the level of subjectivity of the gaslighting domains, the degree of self-doubt that gaslighting tactics may engender, and the extent of healing. Their stories also demonstrate how profoundly gaslighting is shaped by context –including systemic and identity-based inequalities, as well as relational power dynamics and social supports.

Three clusters of findings emerged from the present study, together illuminating common themes and patterns in how gaslighting tactics are deployed, the nature and magnitude of harm that they cause, and when and how they fail, because survivors are able to resist. The first cluster consisted of a rich description of the gaslighting process in the context of IPV. The second cluster described participants' long-term responses to gaslighting, namely ongoing self-doubt or regaining self-trust. The third cluster explored the various ecological factors that contributed to either self-doubt or resistance in the face of gaslighting tactics. The following chapter reviews the key findings of each of these clusters, in the context of prior research and

then, later, in the context of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). Finally, it discusses limitations and implications for future practice and research.

### **Cluster I: The Gaslighting Process**

The first cluster of findings from this study illuminated how gaslighting occurs in intimate relationships and how it feels to be gaslit. This study began with a tentative formulation of a two-part model of gaslighting, involving both a) gaslighting tactics and b) resulting self-doubt. Over the course of this study, participants clarified and deepened this definition. For instance, while survivors did describe experiences of both part a) without part b) and vice versa, it became clear that both are necessary to constitute gaslighting: If only part a) were required, then *every* instance of one person, e.g. lying to or insulting another person would count as gaslighting, and it would become a term so broad and diffuse as to be virtually meaningless. On the other hand, if only part b) were required, then any time a person felt doubt or confusion in a relationship, for any reason, they could claim to be gaslit. Then gaslighting would become a concept completely divorced from interpersonal harm or abuse. Given the need, then, for a two-part definition of gaslighting, the following section considers, first, part a) tactics, and then part b) self-doubt, highlighting for both where the findings of the current study align with prior research and where they deepen our understanding of gaslighting, adding nuance and complexity. This section concludes with a brief discussion of the harmful impacts of gaslighting, described by survivors in this study.

#### **Part A: Gaslighting Tactics**

The first part of gaslighting occurs when harming partners challenge survivors' knowledge, understanding, or beliefs about themselves and the world, in various ways. Participants in this study shared the tactics that their harming partners used, including directly,



verbally challenging their knowledge or beliefs, coercing them, hiding and moving objects, and drawing in other people. Participants' descriptions of the tactics that their harming partners used to challenge their self-trust aligned with some accounts from previous psychological abuse literature. Specifically, participant descriptions closely mirror the strategies that Tolman has referred to as tactics of psychological destabilization:

An abuser may deny his actions or blame his partner for his abusive behavior or angry moods. He may lie about his whereabouts or activities and then accuse her of overreacting when she confronts him. He may hide her possessions and deny any knowledge of their whereabouts (Tolman, 1992, p. 297).

All of the tactics Tolman described came up in the interviews for this study, as did tactics that echo examples from other psychological abuse studies, such as repeating a lie or insult over and over, to inculcate it or create confusion (Lammers et al., 2005; P. H. Smith et al., 1995), calling survivors “crazy” (Alsaker et al., 2018; Warshaw et al., 2014), attempting to distort survivors' memories and perceptions (Ferraro, 2006; Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Lammers et al., 2005), undermining their abilities (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016), and manipulating them to look “crazy” in public or in front of other people (Williamson, 2010).

Some existing measures of psychological abuse also include items that align with the gaslighting tactics described in this study. For instance, the PMWI items “told me my feelings were crazy” and “tried to make me feel crazy” (Tolman, 1989), the Questionnaire on Psychological Abuse (QPA) items, “my partner denied having told me things that he really had told me” and “my partner accused me of constantly imagining things that hadn't happened” (Moreno-Manso et al., 2014), and the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ)

items, “tells other people that there’s something wrong with me” and “questions my sanity” (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998) all echo experiences that survivors in this study endorsed. However, notably, a number of the most commonly-used measures of IPV and emotional abuse, such as the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) and the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA; Murphy & Hoover, 1999) do not include any items that reference gaslighting tactics.

Along with confirming and solidifying the previous glimmers of evidence of gaslighting tactics, the current study is also the first to identify multiple domains of gaslighting tactics. Survivors described gaslighting in the domains of memory, interpretation of harmful behaviors and other experiences, mental status, fundamental traits, abilities in specific roles, and value to other people. These gaslighting domains varied along a continuum of subjectivity, ranging from the most concrete, material perceptions, e.g. denying having insulted the survivor or denying having hidden a set of keys, to more malleable, subjective beliefs, e.g. about whether a survivor is a good mother, is spoiled, or is to blame for a conflict. Multiple domains of gaslighting typically occurred within a single relationship, and survivors sometimes described greater resistance in one domain than in another, as will be discussed further below. The findings from this study tentatively suggest that, not only do gaslighting tactics occur along a continuum of domains, but that gaslighting attempts in different domains may lead to different outcomes.

### **Part B: Degrees of Doubt and Resistance**

Along with the gaslighting tactics that their partners used, survivors also described the epistemic self-doubt they felt in response. While all participants questioned themselves to some extent in response to gaslighting tactics, many also had moments of resistance, when they

refused to accept their harming partners' narratives or version of events over their own. For some survivors, this varied by domain. For instance, they may have been particularly inclined to doubt their likeability but not their intelligence, based on prior life experiences of feeling vulnerable in that domain. For others, this varied over time, as they gradually developed greater resistance. Other survivors described a maddening experience of going back and forth between doubting and trusting their own knowledge, sometimes day-to-day, other times minute-to-minute.

**Self-doubt.** The forms of self-doubt described by survivors in this study align with prior descriptions from the psychological abuse literature. Survivors reported experiences of questioning, crazy-making, feelings of surreality, and loss of self.

Self-trust is fundamental to our ability to make decisions and actions on a daily basis. A number of scholars have explored what it means to have self-trust (Govier, 1993; Pasveer, 1997), but no one has more poignantly described the impacts of losing self-trust than philosopher Trudy Govier, who has written:

Anyone is likely to distrust himself or herself in some specific situations. Far from being a handicap, self-distrust in this sense may on occasion be helpful in causing one to hold back from mistakes and rash behavior. But core distrust of oneself—self-doubt in fundamental areas—is something else again. To lack confidence in one's own ability to observe and interpret events, to remember and recount, to deliberate and act generally, is a handicap so serious as to threaten one's status as an individual moral agent. Suppose that one were to distrust one's own memory of one's childhood, one's ability to understand the gestures and comments of other people, one's instinctive feelings toward acquaintances and possible friends, one's sense of one's interests and abilities as regards occupation and leisure activities, and one's ability to define and implement future goals.

With such extreme self-doubt—a lack of self-trust in core areas, a lack of any sense that one is fundamentally a worthy and competent person—one could scarcely function as a person. With the self in default, something else would take over. Perhaps one would be governed by others—a parent, husband, or charismatic leader. Or The Party. (Govier, 1993, p. 108)

Participants described exactly this phenomenon, sometimes experiencing a self-doubt so intense that they opted to give over all reasoning and decision-making to their harming partners. This total loss of voice or self, endorsed by a number of participants, also aligns with the examples from the psychological abuse literature about the ways that self-doubt can lead to what Abramson calls “existential silencing” (Abramson, 2014)—that is, feeling like they were “coming apart” or that they did not know who they were anymore (Lammers et al., 2005; Loring, 1994; Marshall, 1999; P. H. Smith et al., 1995).

Survivors in this study also described questioning themselves, feeling confusion, and having difficulty trusting their own judgments or decision-making abilities. All of these are forms of self-doubt have also been described in the literature (Portnow, 1996; P. H. Smith et al., 1995; Whiting et al., 2012). Participants also described a sense that reality felt warped, aligning with literature on “surreality” or a “Twilight Zone” experience (Ferraro, 2006; Williamson, 2010). Finally the term “crazy” resounded throughout the interviewees in this study, as it has in previous studies of psychological abuse and gaslighting (Burnett, 2020; Eisenberg, 2011; Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Sleutel, 1998; Sweet, 2019).

**Resistance.** The current study is the first to recognize resistance as an alternative to self-doubt, in response to gaslighting tactics. The presence of both resistance and doubt responses in this study clarifies the necessity of a two-part model of gaslighting. While scholars have

previously suggested that psychological abuse may be best understood as a combination of both harmful behaviors and their impacts (Tolman, 1992), the current study extends this specifically to gaslighting, whereby tactics *and* self-doubt are both required for an instance to constitute as successful gaslighting. Models that either conflate tactics and self-doubt or attend only to tactics seem to suggest either that self-doubt is inevitable in the face of gaslighting tactics or that the efficacy or impact of the tactics is irrelevant. By drawing attention to the possibility of resistance, this study provides important preliminary findings for designing and implementing gaslighting interventions. If survivors do resist gaslighting tactics, then interventions can be designed to foster or support this resistance.

Survivors in this study outlined a spectrum of degrees of doubt and resistance. Although in some instances, survivors completely accepted or adopted their harming partners' narratives or fully recognized and resisted gaslighting narratives, there were still other instances when they went back and forth, feeling confused, or repeatedly changing their minds about who to believe. Survivors further highlighted the complex and changing nature of these responses over time and in different contexts. Some experienced self-doubt in one or multiple domains but resistance in others. Even those who felt tremendous self-doubt in multiple domains sometimes drew the line at challenges to their knowledge of empirical facts: In other words, they felt profound confusion and doubt about, e.g. their own character or intentions, but they were unwilling to accept that they had physically been somewhere, done something, or said something of which they had no recollection. This pattern was exemplified by the survivor who refused to (falsely) admit that she had cheated on her boyfriend, but did begin to wonder if she was somehow to blame for her boyfriend's suspicion, for instance by acting overly flirtatious or being dishonest. Survivors' responses changed over time, as well. For instance, some survivors began to recognize and resist

gaslighting tactics more towards the end of the relationship. These findings, taken together, depict a nuanced and complex tapestry of resistance and doubt, in the face gaslighting tactics: Experiences of doubt varied substantially between survivors and even within the same person.

### **Harmful Impacts of Gaslighting**

The harmful impacts of gaslighting described by survivors in this study are also worth briefly noting. Survivors described emotional distress, lower self-esteem, and physical and mental health challenges, as well as negative effects on their relationships. All of these are known harmful effects of IPV, more generally (Goodman et al., 2009; Lagdon et al., 2014; Plichta, 2004; Tolman, 2011). At times, survivors in this study drew the connection between self-doubt and these outcomes very clearly, and at other times it was less explicit. Regardless, the findings of this study suggest that gaslighting may play a role in contributing to many of the negative sequelae associated with IPV, and more research is needed to understand the full nature and magnitude of this role.

### **Cluster II: Long-Term Responses**

In the second cluster of findings, the participants in this study provided the first empirical account of what happens to survivors' self-doubt once they have left their harming relationships, namely when, how, and to what extent they recovered self-trust. As discussed below, participant descriptions of this phenomenon mirrored the spectrum of resistance and doubt outlined above, with some survivors describing ongoing doubt, others reporting they had regained self-trust, and still others moving back and forth between the two, having better and worse days, and actively practicing and cultivating self-trust.

### **Lingering Self-Doubt**

While the long-term implications of gaslighting in IPV have not been systematically explored before, one dissertation on self-doubt in adults described people who had experienced gaslighting from their families in childhood as having developed a “disposition or stance of self-doubt and a disbelief in her ability to know, feel or need, which is then brought into adulthood” (Portnow, 1996, p. 262). This finding suggests that gaslighting, at least in childhood, may indeed cause long-term damage to a person’s sense of self-trust. In the current study, survivors of gaslighting in IPV endorsed a similar experience: Some described a continual need to go back and check the notes that they left for themselves, to reassert that they had not made up their experiences. Others reflected on an ongoing epistemic shakiness and liability to resort back to feeling that they were the “crazy” one, when new conflicts arose in relationships. Some survivors also described struggling to make decisions independently, even after the gaslighting ended, relying more on others than they had in the past to double-check their instincts or confirm their decisions. These lasting ramifications point to the ways that gaslighting may profoundly undermine survivors’ sense of themselves as trustworthy, reliable narrators and agents in their own lives, even in new relationships and contexts.

### **Regaining Self-Trust**

Survivors in this study also shared stories of regaining self-trust, after their gaslighting relationships ended. For some, this process had already begun before the harming relationship ended, as they resisted more and more. For others, it continued to be an arduous, ongoing process, taking years. Survivors expressed greater confidence in their abilities, perceptions, and judgment, describing a new-found assertiveness and ability to set boundaries in relationships. They also looked back on moments of confusion or doubt in their gaslighting relationships with

more clarity than they had before, for instance expressing confidence that now they *knew* their partner had been lying, when, at the time, they had felt confused or unsure. Yet some of the same survivors who described these experiences also continued to experience moments of self-doubt, as well. For instance, they had some days that were better than others, or certain contexts would bring back the self-doubt.

These findings suggest that healing from the self-doubt of gaslighting, like other aspects of gaslighting, is not a monolithic or binary experience. Rather, survivors seem to fall along a continuum of healing, with some survivors feeling a great sense of empowerment and clarity, once they have left the harming relationship, others remaining stuck in a place of utter confusion and doubt, and many more falling somewhere in between. These dynamics may shift over time, as well, depending on a range of contextual factors. These contextual factors are the subject of the following section.

### **Cluster III: Impacts of Ecological Factors**

While one previous sociological account has documented the impact of social identities and system interactions in the gaslighting process (Sweet, 2019), no other study so far has explored gaslighting through an ecological framework. This framework emphasizes the role of contextual factors at different levels of a person's surrounding (or ecosystem) on trauma risk and resilience (Harvey, 1996, 2007; Tummala-Narra, 2007) or other aspects of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In cluster three, participants described individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional ecological factors that contributed to either self-doubt or resistance in the face of gaslighting tactics. The following section reviews key findings from each of these ecological levels, in the context of prior literature.



## **Individual Ecology**

Participants in this study emphasized the role of individual factors, related either to themselves or their harming partners, as critical to the development of gaslighting— either making them trust themselves *less* or trust their partners *more*. These factors included lingering effects from survivors’ past trauma histories as well as their partners’ charisma and charm. Survivors also described education about IPV as one particular individual factor that contributed to their ability to resist self-doubt. Each of these factors is described in more detail below.

Although no previous studies have specifically investigated the influence of individual ecological factors on susceptibility to self-doubt in the face of gaslighting tactics, invocation of survivors’ personal, pre-existing vulnerabilities has been documented in the IPV literature, more broadly. Dutton and Goodman (2005) identify exploitation of survivors’ vulnerabilities as a key component of coercive controlling relationships, and numerous studies have also documented the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adulthood revictimization (Bensley et al., 2003; Lilly, London, & Bridgett, 2014; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). The current study is the first, however, to specifically document the ways that lingering impacts of survivors’ prior trauma histories exacerbated their vulnerability to self-doubt, in the face of gaslighting tactics: Survivors described vulnerability due to prior gaslighting experiences from their families of origin, memory issues associated with traumatic stress responses, and pre-existing relational narratives that suggested that they were to blame for their experiences of abuse, making the gaslighting familiar and easier to believe,

Survivors also described their harming partners’ charm and charisma as a factor that contributed to their self-doubt. These personality traits have been documented in harming partners before and noted as an important mechanism through which skillful perpetrators avoid detection

(Day & Bowen, 2015). Survivors in the present study suggested their partners' charming and sociable personalities, not only helped them hide the abuse from other people, but also, in a way, from the very people they were harming—making survivors feel confused and doubt their own interpretations of abusive dynamics.

Survivors also described one particular individual-level experience that contributed to their ability to resist self-doubt, namely the experience of learning more about IPV and dynamics of abusive relationships. A key domain of gaslighting in this study was participants' interpretation of behaviors or interactions within their harming relationships (where their partners convinced them that they were e.g. overreacting or in some way to blame.) Therefore, learning more about IPV, especially psychological abuse and coercive control, and beginning to recognize those same dynamics in their own relationships, helped them gain a validating perspective on their experiences.

### **Interpersonal Ecology: Harming Partners**

At the interpersonal level, harming partners contributed to survivors' self-doubt through a range of other abuse tactics, from physical and sexual violence, to surveillance and financial abuse, to verbal degradation. A substantial body of literature describes the ways that various abuse tactics may co-occur in harming relationships, reinforcing one another and creating a web that survivors feel powerless to escape (e.g. Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Pence & Paymar, 1986; E. Stark, 2007). However, no prior study has explored how other abuse tactics specifically contribute to or set the stage for gaslighting, by increasing survivors' vulnerability to *self-doubt* in particular. Survivors in this study have provided a preliminary picture of just how this unfolds: They described how harming partners threatened and intimidated them into acquiescing to a different version of reality; how they used physical abuse, such as knocking a survivor

unconscious, to increase survivors' confusion about their own memories; how they degraded them verbally and sexually, making them feel worthless, such that they valued their own opinions and perspectives less; and even how the overall dynamics of IPV made survivors have panic attacks, feel depressed, or develop trauma-related memory issues, such that they felt "crazy," unstable, or unwell. These traumatic brain injuries, memory loss, feelings of going "crazy", fear, sense of being trapped, and profound sense of worthlessness all made harming partners more believable when they accused survivors of being forgetful, incompetent, or "crazy." In other words, all of these other abuse tactics served to widen the gulf between survivors' and their partners' authority or credibility, opening survivors up to great self-doubt.

### **Interpersonal Ecology: Social Support**

Another piece of the gaslighting ecology that survivors described was their social support networks. Indeed, survivor described their relationships, e.g. with friends, family, and other survivors as critical to their sense of self-trust or self-doubt. Psychologists have long documented that people are more likely to concede to others' ways of seeing things, sometimes even literally altering their own perceptions or empirical reality, when they believe that they are alone in their perceptions and that everyone else sees something a different way to them (Asch, 1951). Further, psychological abuse scholars have argued that, whether or not survivors believe or accept their harming partners' accusations may depend on whether and what social supports they can access (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). These dynamics played out clearly in the current study, where survivors' isolation contributed to their vulnerability to self-doubt: Sometimes harming partners accomplished this by physically isolating survivors from community, for instance moving them far away from friends and family, sabotaging their attempts to develop friendships or find employment, or, in one extreme case, trapping a survivor alone in the house for long

periods of time. Other times harming partners *epistemically* isolated survivors—convincing them *you are alone on this—no one else sees this the way that you do*. This, they achieved by claiming that other people had been saying negative things about them behind their backs that reinforced gaslighting narratives, manipulating survivors to look “crazy” in front of others, and even drawing friends and family members into supporting or corroborating gaslighting narratives. Still other times, isolation was not an explicit abuse tactic, but survivors simply entered their gaslighting relationships with few social supports, whether that was because they came from a family that had been fractured by significant stressors and trauma in the past, simply identified as an introverted person with a relatively small social circle, or, in one case, had only recently arrived in the country as an undocumented immigrant. In other cases, survivors withdrew from their communities over the course of their harming relationships, out of shame or embarrassment. Regardless of *how* they came to be isolated, when survivors in this study found themselves alone with only their own word against their harming partner’s, they found it harder to resist self-doubt.

Where isolation increased harming partners’ power to shape survivors’ reality, social supports decreased it. In their interviews, survivors shared examples of beginning to resist gaslighting tactics when others saw and corroborated their perceptions, like the survivor whose sister overheard her fight with her husband on the phone. They also began to resist and to re-develop epistemic self-trust when they met other survivors who recognized, understood, and even shared their experiences. Survivors throughout this study found that relationships where they were listened to, trusted, and believed, as well as those where other people simply stood up for and confirmed their perceptions, provided an important source of support for fostering resistance.

### **Interpersonal/Institutional Ecology: System Players**

Institutional ecological factors are those that pertain to a survivor's experiences navigating large systems and institutions, such as governmental agencies, schools, or religious organizations, and institutional betrayal occurs when institutions further harm those who come to them for support or help, betraying their trust (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). In the current study, survivors described instances of institutional betrayal, whereby system players contributed to their self-doubt, often in response to harming partners' attempts to draw institutions into their gaslighting tactics. For instance, harming partners lied to mental health professionals, police, and court actors, telling these system players that survivors had done things that they had not done or manipulating survivors to look "crazy" in front of them. These tactics align with findings from one previous gaslighting study, which found that harming partners would exploit survivors' marginalized identities, such as gendered and racialized identities, to discredit them in front of system players (Sweet, 2019).

Survivors experienced institutional betrayal, e.g. when their couples' therapist did not recognize and played into gaslighting dynamics, or when police believed their partner's mischaracterizations, contributing to survivors' sense that their partner must be understanding something better than they did. Survivors' self-doubt in response to collusion by system players has been anecdotally hinted at in previous literature (Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Gutowski & Goodman, 2020). Survivors' experiences of invalidation by system players functioned much like the epistemic isolation described in the previous section on social supports—it deepened survivors' sense that they were alone in their perceptions—but with the additional gravitas and authority of professional expertise and institutional power.

Along with their experiences of institutional betrayal, some survivors also had interactions with system players that strengthened their resistance to self-doubt, such as a therapist who validated their perceptions or a DV advocate, CPS worker, or Title IX officer who provided counter-narratives to the gaslighting. Advocates of survivor-centered DV practice argue that, “Women experiencing abuse need to have their full experience validated... [and] may feel relieved to know that someone understands and can name the mystifying array of abusive behaviors her partner has directed at her” (Tolman, 1992, p. 298). The findings of this study support this claim, suggesting that when they believe or validate survivors’ perceptions, system players have substantial power to support survivor resistance to gaslighting.

### **Ideological Ecology**

At the ideological level, survivors reflected on how internalized social messages about their own identities made them more vulnerable to self-doubt. Previous studies have documented the ways that harming partners may invoke, e.g. mental health status, gender, racial identity, and immigration status as part of gaslighting tactics in IPV (Bonomi et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018; Sweet, 2019), and the findings of the present study support this account: Harming partners frequently attacked identities or traits associated with femininity, such as calling survivors bad mothers or wives or accusing them of being flirtatious or cheating. They also invoked other marginalized elements of survivors’ identities, including their histories of mental illness.

Not only were stereotypes leveraged by harming partners in this study, they also contributed to survivors’ self-doubt, whether or not their partners directly invoked them. Psychological abuse scholar, Marti Tamm Loring, has described how ideology may contribute to vulnerability to IPV in general:

Even before the abuse begins, the foundation has been laid by earlier experiences that predispose many women to internalize the culture's devaluation of their self, leading them to tolerate the discounting and negation characteristic of emotionally abusive relationships... Social groups treated this way by the dominant society may exhibit a similar susceptibility to abuse (Loring, 1994, p. 68).

Survivors in this study shared examples of how this kind of internalized devaluation can specifically lead to self-doubt, in response to gaslighting tactics. They described believing that they must be the one doing something "wrong" in their relationship, because of internalized, gendered, victim-blaming stereotypes; They said they were more likely to trust, believe, and go along with their husbands because of social messages they had received that it was a wife's duty to listen to and obey the man of the house; One survivor said she just assumed that she was the one who was misunderstanding the dynamics in her relationship, because her husband came from a highly educated family, while many of her relatives struggled with addiction or were incarcerated; Another had internalized messaging that, because she was queer and polyamorous, her "lifestyle" was probably to blame for all of her problems; Yet another said that it did not occur to her that she was even allowed to have her own voice and subjectivity, as an undocumented immigrant. These controlling images seeped into survivors' understandings of their own and their harming partners' authority and credibility, tipping the scales again further towards the partners and increasing their ability to manipulate and define survivors' reality.

The individual, interpersonal, ideological, and institutional ecological factors described in this section contributed to survivors' sense of self-doubt and their harming partners' ability to hold power over them. All of the survivors in this study reported relevant factors across multiple ecological levels, and these factors occurred simultaneously and reinforced one another. In fact,

it is likely that gaslighting is hardest to resist and most destructive when factors across different ecological levels conspire together (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey, 1996).

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Drawing together the findings described above, this study provides several novel contributions to the study of IPV that enable a deeper understanding of the role of gaslighting in this damaging dynamic: First of all, this study introduced a two-part model of gaslighting, whereby gaslighting consists of a *combination* of abuse tactics and self-doubt. Within this two-part model, the current study clarified and confirmed the kinds of tactics employed by gaslighters, which had been hinted at by other names in prior psychological abuse literature. Perhaps even more importantly, it introduced the concept of gaslighting domains, identifying core topics that gaslighting tactics repeatedly addressed, across survivors. The current study also provided the first account of survivors' subjective experiences of self-doubt, in the face of gaslighting tactics, as well as introducing the possibility of resistance to self-doubt and the complex terrain of resistance and doubt that may play out within any individual gaslighting relationship. This study is also the first to consider what happens to survivors' sense of self-trust after their gaslighting relationships end, finding a similarly complex terrain of—sometimes simultaneous—ongoing doubt and re-establishment of self-trust. Finally, this study built upon previous research that has explored how social power and system players may influence gaslighting tactics, to outline the impact that various ecological factors may have on a gaslighting survivor's experience of resistance and doubt. Survivors' past trauma, their knowledge of IPV, and their partners' personalities were all relevant factors, as were internalized stereotypes, other abuse tactics in the relationship, and support and validation (or lack thereof)



from family, friends, and system players. Collectively, these findings represent a substantial leap forward in our understanding gaslighting and how it fits into the dynamics of IPV.

### **Gaslighting In the Context of Relational Cultural Theory**

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), provided a sensitizing framework for the current study, as described in chapter two. The following section returns to RCT: first, reviewing how central concepts from RCT can sharpen a number of the elements of gaslighting described above, and, second, outlining how the present study's exploration of gaslighting in IPV may, in turn, sharpen one of the central concepts in RCT, that of mutual growth fostering relationships.

#### **How RCT Illuminates Gaslighting**

The RCT concepts of “power over” dynamics in relationships, of relational and controlling images, and of chronic disconnection and condemned isolation all align with and illuminate the accounts of gaslighting provided by survivors in this study.

**“Power over” dynamics.** Contrary to previous models of development, which conceptualize human flourishing through individuation, separation, and self-actualization – e.g. a “separate self” – RCT emphasizes the central role of mutual, growth-fostering relationships in wellbeing across the lifespan – e.g. a “self-in-relation” (Jordan, 2001, 2017; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). According to RCT theorists, the widely pervasive myth of the separate self promotes “power over” tactics, whereby one person or group maintains autonomy and power through the subjugation of another (Jordan, 2017). One of the tactics that RCT theorists describe dominant people or groups using to maintain power over another is isolating them and silencing their experiences and opinions, declaring, “Our reality is the [only] reality. If your reality differs, we judge it and stratify it. Your reality is less good than is ours” (Jordan, 2017, p. 238). This tactic of developing “power over” survivors was evident in the present study,

where harming partners either literally, physically isolated survivors or *epistemically* isolated them. They then made claims that were fully incompatible with survivors' perceptions (e.g. *I never said that*) and judged or subordinated survivors' perceptions (e.g. *You are crazy!*) Of course, in close relationships, people often see, recall, or interpret situations differently to one another. However, RCT's conceptualization of harmful "power over" dynamics clarifies the ways that gaslighting differs from these experiences of mere disagreement. The distinct "power over" dynamics of gaslighting leave no space for mutual dissent and curiosity; it affords only one singular, totalizing narrative.

**Relational and controlling images.** RCT theorists have described relational images as, "expressions of individuals' expectations and fears of how others will respond to them" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 284; Miller & Stiver, 1995). Thus, a gaslighting survivor who has come to see herself as crazy, unreliable, and "beyond the pale" may carry this perception of herself into relationships with others. Survivors in this study described bringing relational images into their gaslighting relationships, for instance negative views of themselves as spoiled or unlikable, which created vulnerability to gaslighting. They also provided examples of the ways their gaslighting experiences created or further entrenched relational images, as they carried self-doubt with them into their future relationships, after the gaslighting ended, relying more on validation from others, and wondering *am I being crazy, again?* The concept of relational images highlights the ways that vulnerability to self-doubt may develop as a thread through may relationships, across the span of an individual's life. It may go all the way back to early childhood and compound or change, as new relationships confirm or disconfirm pre-existing relational images.

Patricia Hill Collins originally described controlling images, related to relational images, as entrenched stereotypes that are employed to subordinate Black women, shaping their views of themselves and controlling their behaviors (Collins, 1986, 2000; Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008; M. Walker & Miller, 2001). Stereotypes of Black women as “the mammy”, “jezebel”, or “welfare queen” reflect the attributes of Black women that threaten white patriarchy most and therefore become sites of dehumanization and domination (Collins, 1986; Miller, 2008; Sparks, 1998). These kinds of harmful stereotypes are, of course, intersectional and may be invoked to control the behaviors of any oppressed group (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Miller, 2008; “The Combahee River Collective statement,” 2015). Many of the ideological ecological factors described by survivors in this study—for instance, of women needing to obey their husbands, of people with lower levels of education not being intelligent or competent, or of undocumented immigrants as voiceless—can be thought of as controlling images. The concept of controlling images illuminates the way that these harmful stereotypes, when internalized by survivors, did truly serve to *control* them, granting their harming partners greater authority to shape their fundamental perceptions of themselves and the world.

**Chronic disconnection and condemned isolation.** According to the RCT idea of self-in-relation, an individual’s relationships and sense of identity develop synchronously, and relationships across the lifespan are central to the very organization of the self (Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). Individuals seek connection in relationships, and when they experience profound disconnection and lack of empathy—particularly when it is chronic over time—they learn to hide or even to “twist” their own experience to align better with the other (Jordan, 2001, 2017). In the case of gaslighting, where an individual’s very perceptions of the world are undermined, such a twisting of experiences results in profound epistemic doubt and confusion.

In mutual, growth-fostering relationships, RCT theorists claim that individuals develop a greater sense of self-worth and a more accurate sense of both themselves and the other person (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 1986). Meanwhile, in the gaslighting relationships described in this study, survivors experienced the very opposite effects – *losing* an accurate sense of self and self-worth. RCT further suggests that the kind of relational disconnection and loss of self and self-worth that gaslighting survivors experience can spiral into further shame and isolation: “Disconnected from one another and ourselves in shame, we spiral into a sense of being beyond the pale, outside of the human community” (Jordan, 2017, p. 240; Miller, 1986). The survivors in this study who described gaslighting’s harmful effects on their sense of self-worth and who reported that they began to withdraw from other relationships out of shame provided a preliminary depiction of how gaslighting can create this form of chronic disconnection and “condemned isolation,” whereby one is “locked out of the possibility of human connection” (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller & Stiver, 1997). These RCT concepts clarify the ways that the epistemic harms of gaslighting contribute to profound loneliness and shame, strengthening harming partner’s power and control in the relationship.

### **How Gaslighting Illuminates RCT: Epistemic Mutuality**

RCT theorists describe mutual growth-fostering relationships as those in which “both people are open to being touched, moved, and changed by each other” (Jordan, 2017, p. 231), and the findings of this study make clear that gaslighting relationships are inherently *not* mutual growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008). The specific manner in which they are not bears further discussion, though, and the following section explores this topic, illuminating a new dimension of mutual, growth-fostering relationships: *epistemic mutuality*.

As described above, harming partners may use gaslighting tactics to develop “power over” survivors, as they may use various other tactics. Yet the “power over” dynamics of gaslighting are unique, among varieties of IPV, in that they are specifically *epistemic* power dynamics, where one person (the gaslighter) claims greater authority *as a knower*, and the other person (the gaslightee) is manipulated into accepting this authority, leading them to doubt their own knowing abilities (Fricker, 2007; Spear, 2019, 2020; C. A. Stark, 2019). This imbalance in epistemic authority and credibility creates an “unlevel knowing field” where the gaslighter unfairly wields power over the gaslightee (Bailey, 2014). From this vantage point, a harming partner can, as described above, create a singular, totalizing view of reality, “judging” and “stratifying” the survivor’s reality as less good (Jordan, 2017). It is this specifically epistemic “power over” dynamic that survivors in this study described as characterizing their gaslighting experiences.

The findings of this study, therefore, suggest a novel, previously unnamed component of mutual growth fostering relationships: that of epistemic mutuality. Epistemic mutuality in relationships, as proposed here for the first time, must be characterized by coexistence, curiosity, and respect for one another’s ways of viewing and understanding the world. People in epistemically mutual relationships may seek to understand, compromise, and even change their point-of-view, as they recognize differing perceptions—or perhaps they sometimes simply coexist, “agreeing to disagree.” Under this paradigm, where both people are respected as knowers, they are not competitors for a single hegemonic narrative. Instead, through mutual epistemic curiosity, differentiation, and exchange, they can build “power with” rather than “power over” each other, ultimately *increasing and enriching* their shared knowledge.

If one were to try to understand exactly *in what way* the gaslighting relationships described in this study were not mutual and growth-fostering, the answer would be a lack of epistemic mutuality. Epistemic mutuality may, in fact, be thought of as the *opposite* of gaslighting. Where one exists, the other cannot. Rather, epistemic mutuality, as defined above, is an antidote to gaslighting and a necessary component of any mutual, growth-fostering relationship.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study should be understood in the context of several limitations, namely that (a) the boundaries between gaslighting and non-gaslighting abuse were murky at times, (b) participants were only able to provide one side of an inherently interpersonal phenomenon, and (c) my own social location may have limited my ability to develop a complete and accurate picture of contextual factors in survivors' lives.

**Definitional clarity.** All of the accounts of gaslighting provided by participants in this study occurred in the context of other abuse tactics, including physical and sexual abuse, as well as other forms of psychological abuse. To extricate and shine a light specifically on one element of a pervasive pattern or environment of coercive control requires a somewhat artificial drawing of clear, bright lines, when, in fact, phenomena are co-occurring and mutually reinforcing. One abuse tactic, such as screaming insults, may have multiple simultaneous consequences: It can make a survivor doubt themselves *and also* feel frightened, trapped, powerless, etc. (Tolman, 1992). There were moments throughout the data collection and analysis of this study where the identification of the murky boundaries between gaslighting and gaslighting-adjacent phenomena became salient. As one example, some survivors described moments when their partners insulted

them, affecting their self-worth or self-esteem. These are related but separate concepts to self-doubt, so these instances were not considered gaslighting.

As a second example, there were moments in this study when survivors described heightened self-doubt, after the abusive relationship ended, because they questioned their own judgment for having gotten into or stayed in such a relationship. Here, survivors describe epistemic self-doubt, but in response to the general reality-warping or crazy-making experience of IPV, not in response to a specific gaslighting tactic. These moments also were not coded as gaslighting.

As a third example, there were occasionally moment in interviews where survivors touched briefly upon a tactic that could have been a gaslighting tactic but did not describe resulting self-doubt. While survivors may have experienced self-doubt in some of these instances, if this was not clearly articulated in the interview, so was not codeable as gaslighting. These examples illustrate some of the challenges of imposing definitional and analytic clarity and structure on a phenomenon that is messy and intangible. All decisions about whether and how to code these gaslighting-adjacent phenomena were made through consensus with secondary coders and consultation with the chair of my dissertation committee (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Furthermore, reflective memo-writing was used in order to “systematically [document] the rationale, outcome, and evaluation of all actions” (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 19; Morrow, 2005).

**One sided-ness.** Another limitation of this study is its one-sided account of an interpersonal phenomenon. Although such accounts are typical in most IPV research, where survivors and harming partners are rarely both interviewed for the same study, the one-sidedness seemed particularly salient in the current study given its focus on disagreement about knowledge

and truth in relationships. We cannot know for sure the extent to which survivors' accounts of their relationships would align with their harming partners' accounts, were we to interview them, and—for that matter—where among these two accounts the “truth” lies. For instance, there may have been moments when harming partners denied having said something *and it is actually true* that they did not say it. Or perhaps a survivor whose partner, e.g. accused her of being a bad mother, was actually engaging in parenting practices that a substantial proportion of the population would agree are concerning.

However, fact-checking participants was not an aim of this study, nor is it an aim for qualitative research, in general. Rather, this study assumed survivors to be “truthtellers” and sought to understand their experiences from their own perspectives (Hall & Stevens, 1991). In fact, critical and feminist scholarship typically recognizes:

The validity of multiple realities woven by historical, contextual, and relational factors. Its assumptions predicate a perspectival quality to knowledge, which makes knowledge relative to the stance, environment, and experience of the knower. Thus the positivist-empiricist notion of a monolithic, true reality that can be accurately perceived if one somehow controls the vicissitudes of personal bias is rejected” (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 18; Morrow, 2005, 2007).

Therefore, the current study's focus on survivor's accounts of their own experiences, rather than on identifying a single objective truth, aligns with the intended critical, feminist research paradigm.

**Researcher identity.** While I did my best in this study to inquire about and understand all aspect of my participants' gaslighting experiences, it is possible that there were things that I failed to capture due to my own identities. For instance, though I asked questions about identities



and power dynamics that may have contributed to gaslighting and specifically probed around marginalized identities (e.g. for queer survivors, survivors of Color, etc.), none of the participants whom I interviewed endorsed racial identity or racialized experiences as an important factor in gaslighting (except one, who explained that being half-white made her worry that she was exaggerating her struggles in order to have a greater personal narrative of oppression, as she imagined women of Color who are fully non-white might have.) It is possible that race simply was not salient for most participants; However, it is also possible that survivors of Color were reticent to share their racialized experiences with me as a white researcher, for instance because I might not understand or because of highly justified mistrust, based in the legacy of exploitative white researchers in this country (e.g. Sue & Sue, 1972; Tuck, 2009).

### **Implications**

Despite the limitations discussed above, this study has a number of important implications, both for clinical practice and advocacy with gaslighting survivors and for future research on gaslighting. Both are discussed below.

#### **Implications for Practice**

As the first rigorous, empirical, psychological account of survivor experiences of gaslighting, the current study provides a number of noteworthy recommendations for therapists and advocates working with survivors. The findings of this study support (a) training and assessment to identify gaslighting and (b) the development of gaslighting interventions.

**Training and assessment to identify gaslighting.** Preliminary research suggest that gaslighting is a prevalent element of IPV (Warshaw et al., 2014), and the present study indicates just how severe and long-lasting the harms of gaslighting can be. Therapists, DV advocates, Title IX officers, CPS workers, and other professionals can better support DV survivors if they are

able to identify, name, and understand the complex and varied dynamics of gaslighting, described throughout this study. Therapists and advocates may be able to help survivors who are still in harming relationships to recognize and resist ongoing gaslighting tactics. They may also be able to help survivors who are no longer in harming relationships to re-establish self-trust. In order to provide these kinds of supports, therapists and advocates should receive training on common gaslighting tactics, impacts on self-doubt, and factors that hinder or promote resistance. Training materials on gaslighting should pay particular attention to the kinds of contextual factors that create fertile soil for gaslighting to thrive. This way, practitioners can help survivors to identify and—to the extent possible—address these exacerbating contextual factors. The development of a tool or measure for assessing the presence of gaslighting in relationships may also help therapists, advocates, and survivors to recognize and respond to gaslighting, when it might otherwise go undetected.

**Interventions to re-establish self-trust.** As well as developing therapist, advocate, and survivor abilities to recognize and assess gaslighting, interventions should also be developed to promote the re-establishment of self-trust among gaslighting survivors. These interventions may include groups for survivors and targeted behavioral interventions to help survivors identify and pursue their own interests and desires.

Support groups for survivors are already a prevalent and well-established component of DV services (Allen & Wozniak, 2010; Macy, Giattina, Sangster, Crosby, & Montijo, 2009), and scholars have previously suggested that they may be particularly beneficial for survivors of psychological abuse (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). The current study supports these findings as well, with a number of survivors describing the value of sharing their stories with and receiving validation from others who have had similar experiences and who can confirm that they are not

“crazy.” DV organizations could develop gaslighting-specific support groups—or modules for exist general support groups—for gaslighting survivors who hope to focus on redeveloping confidence in their own perspectives and judgments, in the context of mutually supportive relationships.

Another intervention for redeveloping epistemic self-trust, following gaslighting, could involve supporting survivors in identifying desires, wishes, and goals that are truly *their own* and taking concrete steps towards realizing these goals. One advisory board member for this study, who identifies as both a clinician and gaslighting survivor, reflected during personal correspondence that the most healing experience she had after her gaslighting relationship ended was acting upon a longstanding desire to move across the country – not for anyone else, but simply for herself. For survivors who have become accustomed to ignoring or discounting their own intuitions or capitulating to another person’s beliefs, encouragement and support not only to tune into their own priorities but then to take tangible steps to pursue them may be particularly powerful.

### **Implications for Research**

This study has a number of implications for future research directions. Specifically, researchers should explore (a) the prevalence and correlates of gaslighting in IPV, and (b) how gaslighting unfolds in contexts other than IPV, and (c) how interpersonal experiences of gaslighting related to broader social movements and political contexts.

**Establishing prevalence and correlates of gaslighting.** As a qualitative descriptive interview study, the current study provides a rich and nuanced account of survivors’ experiences of gaslighting in IPV, in their own voices. However, this study did not address the prevalence of gaslighting among IPV survivors. Studies of “mental health coercion” by the National Domestic

Violence Hotline have established the high prevalence of survivors who claim that their harming partners have called them “crazy” or tried to convince them that they were (Warshaw et al., 2014), but this is only one dimension of a more complex phenomenon. In order to establish the prevalence of gaslighting among IPV survivors, researchers should develop a gaslighting measure that assess both the presence of gaslighting tactics and resulting epistemic self-doubt. Scholars have already developed one gaslighting scale (Bhatti et al., 2021), but it does not reflect the critical two-part definition of gaslighting put forth in this study and has only been validated on a sample of Pakistani survivors, so may not be culturally relevant for U.S. samples. Once a two-part measure has been developed, it could then be used to establish the prevalence of gaslighting in a large, statistically powerful sample of IPV survivors.

A quantitative gaslighting measure that captures both tactics and epistemic self-doubt would also be valuable for further exploring risk factors and effects of gaslighting. In the current study, survivors described a range of negative implications of gaslighting, including mental health problems, but a quantitative study of gaslighting and mental health outcomes could specifically isolate the effects of gaslighting on mental health, controlling for the impacts of other aspects of IPV, to determine if and what the unique implications of gaslighting are. Researchers could similarly explore risk factors for gaslighting, such as experiences of childhood trauma or lack of social supports.

**Understanding gaslighting in other contexts.** Future research studies should also expand the literature on gaslighting to contexts outside of IPV. Anecdotal accounts suggest that gaslighting occurs in a range of non-romantic relationships, including parents (Leve, 2017; Westover, 2018), therapists (Elise, 2015), and colleagues (Fraser, 2021). Similarly, there are a handful of accounts of gaslighting within the medical and legal systems (Epstein & Goodman,

2019; Pagán, 2018), and some scholars have begun to document the role of gaslighting tactics in maintaining forms of structural oppression, such as systemic racism (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Tobias & Joseph, 2018). However, the academic literature on gaslighting remains sparse and disjointed, employing a range of different definitions of gaslighting. Researchers should continue to develop the body of evidence for gaslighting in various interpersonal and institutional contexts. By fleshing out this literature and narrowing in on a more standardized conceptualization of gaslighting, scholars can begin to develop a clearer picture of similarities, differences, and patterns across these different contexts.

**Gaslighting and social movements.** In this current sociopolitical moment, gaslighting-related epistemic concerns are at the forefront of U.S. American consciousness from “fake news” and the Trump presidency to the #metoo movement and racial microaggressions (DeAngelis, 2009; Garber, 2019; Kitchener, 2018; Toews, 2020). The extent to which gaslighting in intimate partner violence and other interpersonal relationships is tied to broader social movements remains unclear and merits further study. For instance, in the year 2022, the right to have an abortion is under attack, challenging people’s (often women’s) right to assert that they *know* what is best for their own lives and bodies. Future research could explore whether and how experiences of being systemically discredited, for instance in regards to decisions about one’s own body and healthcare, influences susceptibility to gaslighting and self-doubt interpersonally. It seems more than mere coincidence that gaslighting often seems to target women’s credibility and knowing abilities, and so does restricting abortion rights (Loring, 1994; Sweet, 2019): Epistemic injustice has always targeted women in particular, and women’s rights seem particularly under attack in the current sociopolitical moment.

Social movements concerning other marginalized identities may also relate to interpersonal experiences of gaslighting. For instance, racial microaggressions sometimes directly undermine the knowing abilities of people of Color or indirectly leave them questioning their own perceptions, wondering “wait, did they really just say that? Did that seem racist, or am I overreacting? Will I be accused of playing the ‘race card,’ if I say something?” (Tschaepe, 2016). These racial dynamics have clear epistemic dimensions, as do current political debates about the extent to which African American history should be emphasized in U.S. public education (Hannah-Jones, 2021). These debates all concern epistemic questions such as *whose version of history is true? Or who has the authority to decide which facts are important?* Again, as with gender and abortion rights, perhaps people who experience systemic epistemic harm associated with marginalized identities may be more susceptible to self-doubt in the face of gaslighting. Perhaps resistance in interpersonal relationships or resistance at a systemic level through social activism may be mutually reinforcing. Future research should explore the relationship between interpersonal experiences of gaslighting and these kinds of systemic epistemic harm and resistance

### **Conclusion**

In her essay, *Silence and Powerless Go Hand in Hand*, Rebecca Solnit writes: “Violence against women is often against our voices and our stories. It is a refusal of our voices, and of what a voice means: the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent; to live and participate, to interpret and narrate” (Solnit, 2017). Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent in recent years that the invisible forms of violence, such as those described by Solnit, are often the *most* painful and *most* destructive. Particularly in this current historical moment, when abortion rights in the U.S. are on the verge of being rolled back, violence against women’s

voices and their rights to participation and self-determination seem acutely relevant. The accounts of gaslighting, shared by survivors in this study, resonate as well with Solnit's description of loss of voice or fundamental ability to interpret and narrate one's own life. This uniquely epistemic form of violence has been underrecognized and understudied, but the survivors who participated in this study have articulated the devastating impacts of feeling that one's own perceptions, memories, and core beliefs are unreliable. They have also demonstrated that the epistemic harms of gaslighting are not inevitable in IPV, that survivors *do* resist; they *do* insist on their own right to participate, interpret, and narrate; and others can support them in their resistance. The more we understand the reality-bending and crazy-making phenomenon of gaslighting, the better-equipped we are to support survivors in resisting this violence against their voices and stories.

Hermeneutic injustice is also a form of violence against voices, through the deprivation of words or concepts needed to make sense of one's experience (Fricker, 2007). This study is, in and of itself, an act of resistance to hermeneutic injustice: giving name, giving shape and clarity to the nebulous, ineffable, and existentially obliterating experience of gaslighting, which we have every reason to believe is a core component of *most* survivors' IPV stories. This study is perhaps not the first, but certainly an early and important step towards bringing this form of violence out of the darkness, where it festers. We are shining a light on gaslighting.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Screening Protocol

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I have a few questions to ask you so I can tell whether you might be a good fit for the study.

Firstly, are you over 18 years old? \_\_\_\_\_

And would you feel comfortable doing at 45–90-minute interview in English? \_\_\_\_\_

Great, thank you. In this study, we are interested in talking to people who have experienced domestic violence or been harmed by a romantic partner, so these next questions are about ways that a romantic partner may have harmed you in the past:

How often did your partner?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Frequently
1. Physically hurt you?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Insult you or talk down to you?	1	2	3	4	5
3. Threaten you with harm?	1	2	3	4	5
4. Scream or curse at you?	1	2	3	4	5

Did any of these behaviors happen in the past ten years? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently in a relationship with someone who is physically hurting you? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel ready and able to talk about your experiences of domestic violence or harm by a romantic partner? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### Introduction

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I'm going to be asking you some questions about any experiences you have had of feeling like you couldn't trust yourself, while you were in a relationship with someone who harmed you. I know that this can be a hard topic to talk about, though, and, we have only just met, so I'll start by sharing a little bit about myself: I'm a graduate student in Boston, studying mental health and violence in relationships. I also work as a therapist part time, and I live with my partner and a very fluffy cat. Do you have any questions about me, before I start asking some questions to get to know you?

### Demographic questions

First, I would like to go through some quick questions to learn a bit more about you.

- How did you hear about this study? What program? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you receiving domestic abuse services now?
  - If yes, what type? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your current living situation? I'm thinking about who you live with, and where you live.
- Do you have children?
  - If yes: How many children do you have? What are their ages?
- What is your race/ethnicity?
- How old are you?
- What is your gender identity?
- How would you describe your sexual orientation?
- How would you describe where you live now - Would you call it city, country, or suburbs?
- Are you currently working?
  - If yes, what do you do?
  - If yes, is your job part time or full-time?
- What is the highest level of education you have finished so far?
- Are you currently a student?
  - If yes, are you a part time or full-time student?
- Where were you born?
  - If outside of U.S.: How long have you been in the United States (U.S.)?
- What language(s) do you feel most comfortable speaking?
- Are you in a relationship with a partner now?
  - If yes: Is this the one that has caused harm in the past? Or was that someone else?

### Experience of gaslighting in IPV

For the rest of the interview, I will be asking about a partner who harmed you. I'm particularly interested in understanding how that relationship impacted your trust in yourself. Have you had more than one harmful romantic relationships in the past ten years? \_\_\_\_\_

*[If yes]* Please answer the following questions thinking about the relationship that impacted your self-trust the most. At the end of the interview, there will also be time to share anything you would like about other harmful romantic relationships.

- Can you give me a made-up name I can use to identify this person? Alias: \_\_\_\_\_
- When were you with this person? (how many years ago)
  - And for how long?

So, thinking about this particular harmful relationship, I am interested to know about any experiences you may have had of feeling hurt mentally or emotionally by things they did or said.

- In particular, did you ever have the feeling that you couldn't trust some aspect of your experience? Like your own memory, your own eyes, or your own judgment about things? *[Probe, if needed: Some people talk about feeling like they are "going crazy."]*
- Can you tell me more about that feeling?
  - Was it something you felt constantly or occasionally?
  - How did it affect you? *[Probe: Something you felt in your body? Mental health? Relationships? Self-Esteem?]*
- Were there specific things your partner would say or do that made you feel that way?
  - What were they?
- Can you tell me a specific story of a time when this happened or it felt really bad? *[Probe: Details- who, what, when, where]*
- I think that every one of us has strengths that we draw on, in the face of really difficult situations. What helped you get through these experiences?

### **Ecological factors in gaslighting**

I'm curious about what your relationships with other people were like, while you were going through this experience of feeling like you could not trust yourself, and also afterwards. *[Note: Here and throughout, uses interviewee's own language around mistrust, discrediting, feeling crazy, etc.]*

- Was there anyone you were talking about it with?
  - Who?
  - What did you talk about with them?
- Did friends or family do or say anything that made you feel worse/more "crazy"/etc. *[use interviewee's language]*

I'm also interested to know if you had any contact with big systems like the courts, medical system, or child protection, while you were in this harmful relationship.

- What was that interaction like?
- Was there any part of the interaction that made you feel worse/more "crazy"/etc. *[use interviewee's language]*

Just to frame these next few questions, I think we all have messages that we get about ourselves growing up. They can be messages we get from our families, like "oh, you are the talkative one" or "we are a really musical family." They can also come from communities we are part of or from the broader culture, like TV or the news, and sometimes these broader messages are based on identities we have, like "Black people are like this", "Women are like that", "Queer people

are like this.” My next set of questions of questions is about how these kind of messages about who you are might have impacted your experiences.

- Can you think of any messages that you got from the larger culture, like messages you received from TV, the news, or religious institutions that you feel like made it harder to trust yourself, when [harming partner] was harming you?
  - Do you feel like any of these messages are related to particular parts of your identity [*Probe potentially salient identities: E.g. As a Black woman? As an immigrant? As a queer person?*]
  - Were there messages from your family about who you are that may have made it harder to trust yourself?
  - What about messages from other people you knew growing up, like friends, teachers, or neighbors?
- Now I’m wondering about messages that may have helped you hold onto self-trust, when things were hard. Can you think of any messages that you got from the larger culture about who you are that helped you hold on to your self-trust, challenge [harming partner], or regain trust later?
  - Did these messages related to any particular parts of your identity [*Probe potentially salient identities: E.g. As a Black woman? As an immigrant? As a queer person?*]
  - What about messages from your family or community about who you are that helped you hold on to self-trust?

*[Pause to check in with participant.]*

### **Experience of healing from gaslighting**

It sounds like there were some times in your relationship when you really felt like you couldn’t trust yourself.

- How do you think or feel about those situations now?
- Do you feel like you trust yourself more now, or do you still feel “crazy” in the same way you did in that relationship?
  - *If trusts more...* What do you think has changed or helped you to trust yourself more?
  - *If still feels “crazy” ...* Can you think of anything that has made it hard to start trusting yourself again? What, if anything, do you think would help?
- Can you give me a specific example of a recent time when you did/didn’t trust yourself in a way that felt similar/different to when you were with your partner?

### **Recommendations/Hopes**

The last few questions I have for you are about changes you would like to see and your hopes for the future.

- Thinking back on your experience of feeling “crazy” in your relationship and how you have felt then, what do you wish that other people in your life had said or done differently?
  - While the behavior was still going on?



- After it ended?
- What do you wish that systems had done differently?
  - While the behavior was still going on?
  - After it ended?
- When you think about your own journey of self-trust, what do you hope for in the future?
  - What do you think will help you in this journey?
- Do you have any other recommendations about what people or systems could do to better to support others who are in similar situations to the one you were in?

Is there anything else that we haven't talked about yet that you think would be important for me to know or other parts of your experience that you would like to share?

Do you know anyone else who you think might be interested in talking with me about their experiences?

Thank you so much for all that you have shared. I have learned a lot from this conversation, and I am so grateful for your time and willingness to talk with me about your experiences. I want to check in and see how you are feeling after our conversation?

If you would like to talk with someone further about anything that this interview has brought up for you, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE (7233). You can call them at any time.

*If the participant seems at all distressed, offer to stay on the call with them until they feel calm enough to end the call.*

Appendix C: Table of Clusters, Categories, and Codes

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Cluster 1: The Gaslighting Process

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Harming partners used a range of gaslighting tactics

Denying or falsely claiming that something happened

Mischaracterizing the survivor

Coercing the survivor to adopt their perspective

Manipulating the physical environment

Drawing in other people

Drawing in formal systems

Gaslighting tactics targeted multiple domains

Memory

Interpretation of harmful or abusive behavior

Interpretation of other experiences

Mental status

Fundamental traits

Abilities in specific roles

Value to other people

Survivors experienced self-doubt in one or more domains

Memory

Interpretation of harmful or abusive behavior

Interpretation of other experiences

Mental status

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Fundamental traits

Abilities in specific roles

Value to other people

Survivors experienced varying degrees of self-doubt

Fully adopting the harming partner's narratives

Recognizing and resisting the harming partner's narratives

Going back and forth about the validity of the harming partner's narratives

Survivors' self-doubt led to harmful corollaries

Emotional distress

Mental health problems

Physical health problems

Devaluation of the self

Greater dependence on others

Failure to reach out for support

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Cluster 2: Long-Term Responses to Gaslighting

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Survivors experienced lingering self-doubt

Memory

Interpretation of events

Mental status

Survivors developed strategies for managing self-doubt and its impacts

Survivors regained self-trust

Memory

Interpretation of events

Mental status

Abilities in specific roles

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Cluster 3: Ecological Influences on Survivor Self-Doubt

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Individual factors

Lingering impacts of past trauma

Physical vulnerabilities

Harming partner's charm or charisma

Learning about or identifying abusive relationships (resistance counter-example)

Interpersonal factors: Harming partners

Threatened or actual physical violence

Sexual violence

Surveillance

Financial abuse

Isolation

Demoting survivor's worth

Threatened or actual harm to others

Over the top attention or affection

Triggering extreme emotional reactions

Interpersonal factors: Social supports

Family and friends went along with gaslighting narratives

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Family and friends provided valuable counter-narratives (resistance counter-example)

Survivors connected with others who had similar experiences (resistance counter-example)

Interpersonal/Institutional factors: System players

Therapists and advocates went along with gaslighting narratives

Police went along with gaslighting narratives

Therapists and advocates provided valuable counter-narratives (resistance counter-example)

Ideological factors

Social messages about gender

Social messages about age or experience

Social messages about SES or education level

Social messages about immigration status

Social messages about racial identity

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