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Psychological violence and manipulative behavior in couple: A focus on personality traits

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Psychological violence and manipulative behavior in couple: A focus on personality traits

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ABSTRACT



Psychological violence is characterized by systematic denigration and humiliation of the partner (victim). It is an insidious and manipulative behavior put in place to ensure that the victim begins to doubt themselves, and their own judgments, to the point of feeling confused and wrong. This behavior pattern is called Gaslighting and the personality traits are characterized by lack of empathy, psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism. These three conditions are part of the so-called dark triad and distinguished by the lack of empathy. The aim of this study is to explore psychological aspects and consequences of Gaslighting phenomena. This systematic review was conducted according to Systematic Reviews guidelines (PubMed and Google Scholar databases), using 2 key terms related to this topic "Psychological Violence" AND "Gaslighting". Data for this systematic review were collected in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). The reviewed studies focused on violence on affective manipulation, abuse trauma that compromises a subject's identity, psyche, self-esteem and sense of self, in women's mental health conditions. Most of the research analyzed is focused on the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples.

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Introduction

The term gaslighting used to define a form of psychological violence, this is insidious, and manipulative behavior into the relation, and can lead the victim to justify the acts of violence. The term Gaslight found in a Hamilton theatrical work of 1938, Gas Lights, initially known as "Angel Street" in the United States, but we can also find cinematographic references, such as, in Alfred Hitchcock's films Rebecca (1940) and Anguish (1944) [1,2].

In this cinematographic reference, from the beginning, we can see how a psychological dynamic is formed based on the marital life of a couple, out of which a psychological drama is born. This results in an unhealthy conjugal relationship, in which the husband, through lucid and constant psychological manipulation, causes the young wife to doubt her mental stability by moving or losing her possessions, lowering, and raising the lights of gas lamps

(gaslight), and attributing these phenomena to visual hallucinations of his wife, until she is convinced that she is really "crazy" [3].

Gaslighting dynamic consists in a systematic denigration, and humiliation of a partner (victim), through relational modalities perverse, and victim progressively loses self-confidence, self-esteem, efficacy, internal and external reference points [4].

This form of psychological violence does not have immediate visibility, and there is not a visible bruise or swelling on the victim's body, but there is progressive extinguishing of the energy, and vitality of the victim, leading to changes in mood, feelings of emptiness and depression [5].

The number of victims of psychological violence is particularly high; specifically, it seems that girls aged 16 to 24 are at greater risk of suffering psychological abuse, including episodes of emotional manipulation. This could

be explained, in part, by some studies that show an increase in psychopathy ranging from 0.6% to 4% [6,7].

However, although we often hear of female victims of violence, we cannot fail to consider the violence that many men suffer daily, above all of a psychological nature. In this regard, research was conducted on a sample of men aged between 18 and 70, in which it emerged that 70% of those interviewed underwent constant humiliation daily by their partner due to their physical appearance or financial situation. As for the manipulative dynamics within a relationship, there seems to be no prevalence of men or women, as manipulative behavior is easily found in both genders [8].

Often, due to gender stereotypes, there is a tendency to consider affective manipulation as a typically male behavioral modality, as it is particularly difficult to think of submissive men; in reality, there are many women able to manipulate their partner, using subtler and less evident behaviors in the eyes of others [9].

Gaslighting is articulated through three phases ranging from a state of tension, characterized by aggression and violence from the emotional and humoral point of view, to a real attack phase, in which we find a prevalence of violent physical situations. The final phase, in which the true gaslighting phenomenon emerges, is characterized not only by aggressive behavior, but also by manipulative attitudes, that have the purpose of modifying the victim's sense of reality [10].

The gaslighter feels the pleasure of distorting reality, whether it is the alteration of reality implemented to confuse the victim or making her doubt her mental state of health and psychiatric efficiency [11-13].

Gaslighting finds a substratum in all those personalities characterized by a lack of empathy, such as psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. These three conditions are part of the so-called "dark triad", distinguished by the lack of empathy, an opportunistic relational style, short-term relationships, in which greater importance is given to the sexual aspect than to the relational aspect. Dark personalities refer to those negative and maladaptive traits that belong to a sub-clinical condition that is not extreme enough to attract clinical or legal interest and to satisfy the criteria for a diagnosis of personality disorder [14].

The "Dark Core" of the Dark Triad is constituted by three aspects: psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism. The central elements of this trait are high levels of impulsivity, a constant search for danger (Thrill Seeking) and low levels of anxiety and empathy [14]. In Machiavellianism we find a cold personality, manipulative and without any moral sense; narcissism, on the other hand, is characterized by a sense of grandeur, superiority, need for admiration and dominance; in psychopathy, we find a personality characterized essentially by a rather high level of impulsiveness, by the

continuous search for new emotions, by the lack of empathy and by the absence of remorse or sense of guilt. In the light of this is important to pay attention at this psychological violence, and to study these phenomena and psychological consequences of violence in couple.

Discussions

Data collected and Method

Data for this systematic review were collected in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Metanalyses.

The PRISMA consists of a checklist intended to facilitate preparation and reporting review/metanalysis studies by identifying, selecting, and critically appraising relevant research, and collecting and analyzing data from the studies that are included in the review.

Eligibility criteria

Articles were included in the review according to the following inclusion criteria: English language, publication in peer reviewed journals, quantitative information on language processing in movement disorders, and year of publication at least 2015. Articles were excluded by title, abstract, or full text for the processes connected to the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples, and for irrelevance to the topic in question. Further exclusion criteria were review articles, books, editorial comments, and case reports/series. Furthermore, we arbitrarily decided to start our research from 2015 to give a more recent view of "the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples".

Research Strategy and study selection

This systematic review was conducted according to Systematic Reviews guidelines, PubMed, and Google Scholar database were searched from 2015/01/01 to 2022/01/12. Using 2 key terms related to this topic "Psychological Violence" AND "Gaslighting". The electronic search strategy used for PubMed, and Google Scholar is described in Table 1.

Table 1. List of search terms entered into the PubMed and Google Scholar search engines for identification the studies for this systematic review.

Number	Search term
1	Psychological Violence [all fields]
2	Gaslighting [all fields]
3	1 AND 2
4	English [Language]
5	2015/01/01 to 2020/01/12 [publication date]

Articles have been selected by title and abstract; the entire article was read if title/abstract was related to the specific issue of the gender violence and manipulative

behavior in couples, and if the article potentially met the inclusion criteria. References of the selected articles were also examined in order to identify additional studies meeting the inclusion criteria.

Figure 1 summarizes the flowchart of articles selected for the review. The search provided a total of 202 citations; no additional studies meeting inclusion criteria were identified by checking the reference list of the selected papers.

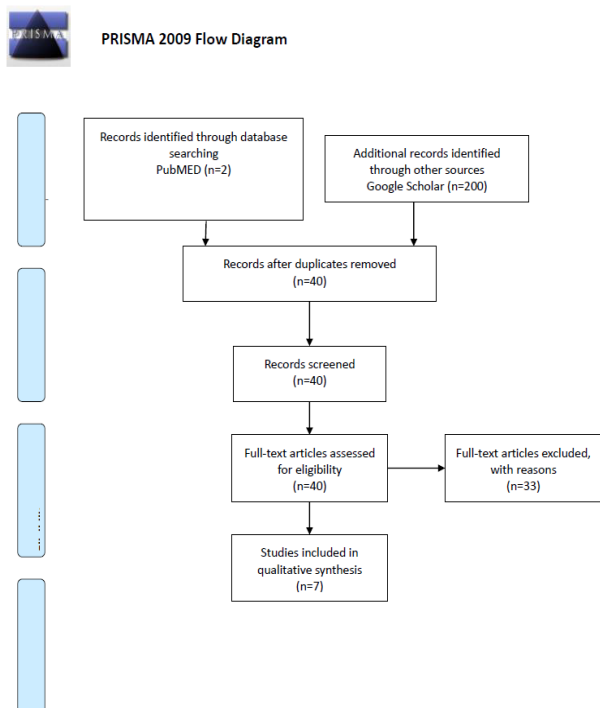


Figure 1. The flowchart of articles selected [15].

After adjusting for duplicates, 40 records were screened. Of these, 33 studies were excluded according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. After the screening, a total of 7 studies assessing the processes connected to the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples met the inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review (Table 2).

References of the selected articles were also examined to identify additional studies meeting the inclusion criteria. Details are reported on Tables 1 and 2.

Results

This review investigated the gaslighting phenomenon and psychological violence in couples. Most of the research analyzed is focused on the gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples. According to scientific literature, this form of psychological abuse is subtle and insidious, gradually destroys the victims' autonomy and her capacity for decision-making.

The studies were focused on violence against women and on affective manipulation Brewer and colleagues (2015) investigated the influence of Machiavellianism, a personality trait characterized by a manipulative interpersonal style and willingness to exploit others, on three areas of sexual behavior [16]. Heym et al. (2019) examined whether impaired empathy indeed represents a common “dark core” binding Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and whether this core explains associations between dark traits and IRA (indirect relational aggression) [17]. Kaufman et al. (2019) expanded the already existing nomological network of the Dark Triad, and to establish a nomological network for the Light Triad, by examining relationships with a wide variety of outcomes [18]. Moshagen et al. (2018) specified the common core of dark traits, which they call the Dark Factor of Personality (D) [19]. Schimmenti et al. (2017) examined the psychometric properties of the Italian translation of the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (DTDD) [20]. Tetrault et al. (2018) investigated how these dark personalities influenced the perpetration of intimate partner violence [21]. Unrau et al. (2019) tested whether attachment avoidance mediated psychopathy–interpersonal outcome relations [22].

Table 2. Studies meeting the inclusion criteria and included in the systematic review

Author	Aim	Sample	Type of measure
Brewer et al. (2015)	This study investigated the influence of Machiavellianism, a personality trait characterized by a manipulative interpersonal style and willingness to exploit others, on three areas of sexual behavior.	Men (N=90) and women (N=192), aged 18-81 years.	-Match IV -YSEX Questionnaire -Sexual Deception Scale -Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale
Heym et al. (2019)	This study examined whether impaired empathy indeed represents a common “dark core” binding Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and whether this core explains associations between dark traits and IRA (indirect relational aggression).	Participants (N = 301, 262 F; 39 M; age range 18–71 years)	-Dark Triad of Personality Scale -Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy - Indirect Aggression Scale

Author	Aim	Sample	Type of measure
Kaufman <i>et al.</i> (2019)	This series of studies sought to expand the already-existing nomological network of the Dark Triad, and to establish a nomological network for the Light Triad, by examining relationships with a wide variety of outcomes.	The sample was composed of 1,518 participants (Study 1 comprised 387 participants; Study 2 comprised 670; Study 3 comprised 267; Study 4 consisted of 194 participants).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The Dark Triad of Personality -The Psychopathic Personality Inventory – Short Form -The Triarchic Personality Measure -The Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory-Short Form -The HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised- Honesty Humility -The Big Five Inventory-2 -The Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs Scale -The Unified Motives Scales -The Portrait Values Questionnaire-Revised -The Values in Action (VIA) Brief Strengths Test -The Defense Style Questionnaire -The Cognitive Triad Inventory -The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale -The Contingencies of Self Worth Scale -The Sense of Self Scale -The Authenticity Scale -The Authenticity Inventory -The Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory -The Love Attitudes Scale -The Adult Attachment Scale– Revised -The Dispositional Positive Emotion Scales Questionnaire-Compassion -The Cognitive, Affective, and Somatic Empathy Scales -The Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire -The Quiet Ego Scale -The Conspicuous Consumption—Extra

Scientific literature showed that gaslighting profile is characterized by a lack of empathy, psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism, these three conditions called dark triad [23-26]. In these personality traits, emotional empathy, which structures emotional intelligence together with the cognitive component, a function that allows us to understand and feel the mind of others, would be absent [26,27]. Heym and colleagues (2019) have showed that, at the base of the dark nucleus, there is a serious lack of empathy; consequently, it is evident that narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism are inversely proportional to empathy since they increase behaviour opposite to it [17]. Also of interest is the work by Kaufman et al. (2019), in which the authors attempted to devise a tool for the evaluation of "Light" traits, that is to say, with benevolent and prosocial attitudes, called the "Light Triad Scale" [18]. The light aspect lends itself greatly to the differentiation of a subthreshold, which may not manifest evidence of the dysfunctional and maladaptive trait, maintaining a prosocial mask of functioning. According to scientific literature, gaslighter dehumanizes the victim, weakens her ego, making it fragile, reducing her to a state of strong psychological and physical dependence. The relational

dynamic, constituted by psychological violence, with particular reference to silences in communication and disparaging language, is not easily recognizable, because it does not tend to make itself visible in a manifest way, but is subtly masked, to the point that the victim does not realize it. The victim, exposed to this protracted behavior, she may have little understanding of the disparaging dynamic and have her self-esteem and autonomy increasingly weakened; may even be afflicted by an instilled sense of guilt, often creating the erroneous belief that she is the source of the couple's problems. Reactive manifestations are mostly indirect and could range from sadness, depression symptoms to psychosomatic disorders, or even to psychological deconstruction, leading the victim to question her sanity.

Keller and colleagues (2014) described narcissistic traits, such as strong repulsion towards taking care of other people and the presence of rather aggressive behaviors within the relationship, marked by insults, humiliations, physical violence, even without a real reason [28]. Another dimension of dark triad, is psychopathy, combines the lack of empathy with selfish and impulsive traits. Psychopathic subjects are not able to process emotions and, consequently, show difficulties in empathic responses to

others [25]. In the study of Unrau & Morry (2019) emerged that attachment style plays an important role between psychopathic traits, and quality of relationships [22].

Several authors highlighted how high levels of Machiavellianism are associated with detachment, the tendency to exploit others, to resort to emotional blackmail and a lack of interest in lasting intimate relationships [16,29-31].

Often, Machiavellianism tends to overlap both with the narcissism, due to apparent self-confidence and high self-esteem, and psychopathy, due to the absence of remorse and the lack of empathy typical of psychopathic personalities. According to scientific literature, Machiavellianism has emerged that personality traits belonging to the dark triad are associated with one another through a common factor, called "D factor", in other words the tendency to push one's individual utility to the limit, to pursue one's own goals, to focus on oneself, without taking others into account. The D Factor tends to be associated with certain obscure personality traits, such as humiliating others, lying, manipulating others, without feeling any remorse or guilt [19,21].

A limitation of this study is the few literatures, there are few empirical studies that describe the incidence of this phenomena, and the psychological consequences on the victim. It is useful for research to continue in this topic, in order to identify the characteristics of this form of psychological violence, and prevent it.

Conclusions

The topic of this research is to describe the psychological violence, manipulative behavior in couples, and the gaslighting phenomenon.

Our review confirms that psychological violence, and the gaslighting phenomenon, is a significantly prevalent issue among couples. Although there have been several attempts internationally to address the issue, our findings pay attention to preventive action, involving multisectoral interventions at various level. Laws and policies in the country should be supplemented with intense implementation efforts coupled with measures such as sensitization, awareness building, and educational initiatives by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This topic is important in the prevention of aspects related to psychopathology; it is a social urgency to deal with the psychological health of women. The aim this paper is to promote victim's one of conscience, progressive autonomy and sense of self.

The mistreatment and perversion follow a continuum that goes from physical to psychological and mental violence. Literature data suggest victims are predominantly women, it seems that girls aged 16 to 24 are at greater risk of suffering psychological abuse, including episodes of emotional manipulation. In this condition is important the

prevention of aspects related to psychopathology, it is a social urgency to deal with the psychological health of women, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, geography, age, and culture. The findings of this paper is important for research, mental health, and social policy at national, and international levels toward combating, and preventing the issue. The study shows literature poorly focused on gender violence and manipulative behavior in couples, and the gaslighting phenomenon.

Compliance with ethical standards

Any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged within the manuscript. Studies involving human subjects must contain a statement reporting their will to adhere to the study and their informed consent. Please report: `Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study`.

Conflict of interest disclosure

If none, please specify: `There are no known conflicts of interest in the publication of this article. The manuscript was read and approved by all authors`. Regardless of the situation, fill out the `Conflict of interest disclosure form` below.

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