

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Workplace Gaslighting: Exploring Employee Coping Strategies**Fatemeh Zahra Tabrizian¹, Abbasali Rastgar^{2*}, Azim Zarei³, Davood Feiz⁴

1. Ph.D. Student, Department of Business Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

2. Professor, Department of Business Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran.

3. Professor, Department of Business Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran.

4. Professor, Department of Business Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran.

***Correspondence**

Abbasali Rastgar

E-mail: a_rastgar@semnan.ac.ir

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Workplace Gaslighting: Exploring Employee Coping Strategies. *Public Organizations Management*, -14(2), 148-166.**EXTENDED A B S T R A C T****Introduction**

Workplace relationships constitute a fundamental dimension of organizational life and shape not only outcomes but also the mental health and professional character of employees. In recent years, increasing scholarly attention has been focused on the destructive interpersonal dynamics in organizations, in toxic workplace environments characterized by abusive supervision, manipulation, exclusion, and psychological aggression. Among these covert and psychologically damaging behaviors, workplace gaslighting has emerged as a distinct and insidious form of emotional abuse.

The term “gaslighting” originates from the 1939 play “Gaslighting,” in which a man manipulates environmental cues to make his wife question his sanity. In organizational contexts, workplace gaslighting refers to a deliberate and systematic pattern of psychological manipulation through which a perpetrator—who is in a position of power—undermines the target’s perception of reality, memory, judgment, or competence. Indirect bullying, subtle and subtle, is disguised as a concern, management feedback. This may include prior agreed-upon decisions, distortion of facts, public or private discrediting, withholding information, or portraying the victim as insensitive or incompetent.

Empirical studies conducted in recent years have documented the harmful messages of gaslighting in the workplace. Research by Katsiroumpa et al. has linked gaslighting to stress, increased work engagement, and decreased self-confidence in one’s professional activities. Similarly, reports by Galanis et al. highlight the link between toxic workplace behaviors and burnout, passive resignation, and intention to quit. These studies establish that gaslighting not only affects interpersonal relationships, but also undermines psychological, organizational, and employee safety.

Despite the growing recognition of its destructiveness, most existing research focuses on defining gaslighting and examining its psychological and organizational messages. Much less attention is paid to understanding the response to and coping with this phenomenon. From a practical perspective, it is crucial to design coping strategies for interventions, strengthen job crafting, and develop supportive organizational policies. From a theoretical perspective, examining coping behaviors provides insight into agency, resistance, and adaptive mechanisms in contexts of power disempowerment.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to identify and analyze the coping strategies employed by employees in response to gaslighting in the workplace in government organizations. This research, with its empirical experiences of a qualitative exploratory nature, seeks lived discoveries, interpretations, and behavioral responses when faced with subtle psychological manipulations. This question addresses the following main question: How do employees cope with gaslighting at the organizational level?

Methodology

This research was developmental in nature and employed an exploratory qualitative design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. Given the covert, context-dependent, and experience-based nature of workplace gaslighting, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to capture nuanced meanings, subjective interpretations, and coping processes that might not

be accessible through quantitative measures.

The study population consisted of two groups: (1) academic experts in management, organizational behavior, and organizational psychology, and (2) employees of governmental organizations in Semnan, Iran, who had direct or indirect experience with workplace gaslighting. Purposeful sampling was employed to select information-rich participants capable of providing in-depth insights into the phenomenon. The inclusion criteria required either professional expertise in organizational behavior and toxic workplace dynamics or firsthand workplace experience relevant to the topic.

A total of 12 participants were interviewed. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new substantive themes emerged after the twelfth interview. The sample included university faculty members, senior managers, administrative staff, financial managers, human resource specialists, and accounting experts, ensuring diversity in organizational roles and hierarchical levels.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on an extensive review of the literature on workplace gaslighting, emotional abuse, coping theory, and toxic organizational climates. Questions explored participants' perceptions of gaslighting behaviors, emotional reactions, coping mechanisms, sources of support, perceived effectiveness of different strategies, and long-term consequences. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined conceptual model. However, in the interpretive stage, findings were discussed in relation to coping theories and research on toxic workplace behaviors. The software MAXQDA 2020 was used to facilitate systematic coding and data management.

To enhance reliability, inter-coder agreement was assessed using Holsti's coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.702, indicating acceptable reliability. Trustworthiness was ensured through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Techniques such as member checking, detailed documentation of analytic steps, maintenance of field notes, and rich contextual description were employed to strengthen methodological rigor.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five overarching themes and thirteen sub-themes representing the coping strategies employed by employees:

1. Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment emerged as a central proactive coping strategy. Participants described efforts to strengthen internal resources, including emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and self-affirmation. Subthemes included self-control, management of emotional reactions to distorted narratives, enhancement of self-concept, and maintaining work-life balance.

2. Evidence-Based Documentation

A second major strategy involved systematic documentation of interactions and events. Participants described recording conversations, preserving emails and messages, writing meeting summaries, and seeking confirmation of instructions in written form.

Documentation served multiple purposes: it restored a sense of cognitive clarity, countered attempts to distort reality, and provided tangible evidence for potential formal complaints. This strategy was perceived as empowering because it reestablished control over facts and minimized self-doubt.

3. Professional Competency Enhancement and Boundary Setting

Many participants responded to gaslighting by strengthening professional performance. They emphasized meticulous task completion, skill development, and demonstrating expertise to reduce opportunities for unjust criticism.

Boundary setting also emerged as an important subtheme. Employees reported learning to say "no" to unreasonable demands, limiting self-disclosure, and carefully managing information flow. By asserting professional limits and reducing exposure to manipulation, they aimed to protect both their credibility and psychological well-being.

4. Social Support and Recourse to Formal Structures

Social validation and collective coping played a crucial role. Participants described consulting trusted colleagues to "reality-check" events, forming informal support networks,

and building alliances. These networks helped counteract isolation and reinforced shared interpretations of contested situations.

In addition, some employees turned to formal organizational mechanisms, such as human resource departments, disciplinary committees, or higher-level management. When combined with documentation, formal reporting was seen as a structured method of confronting manipulative behavior.

5. Avoidant and Passive Strategies

The final theme reflected more withdrawal-oriented responses. These included silence, emotional distancing, reduced engagement, minimal compliance with extra-role tasks, and physical avoidance of the perpetrator.

For some participants, coping culminated in contemplating resignation or actively seeking alternative employment. While often described as a last resort, leaving the organization was perceived as a necessary self-protective act when other strategies proved ineffective.

Overall, findings indicate that employees employ a combination of proactive (empowerment, documentation, competence-building) and defensive (avoidance, withdrawal) strategies. The choice of strategy appeared influenced by perceived organizational support, power imbalance, and personal resilience.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that employees confronted with workplace gaslighting adopt multidimensional coping strategies that operate at psychological, behavioral, professional, and organizational levels. Rather than remaining passive recipients of manipulation, participants actively sought to restore control, protect their professional identity, and preserve their psychological well-being. Our findings also indicate that employees utilize compensatory and psychological empowerment strategies to reconstruct their lost psychological cohesion in the face of this collapse.

Psychological empowerment—through emotional regulation, self-affirmation, and cognitive reframing—emerged as a core internal resource, consistent with resilience-based perspectives in organizational psychology. Evidence-based documentation functioned as a practical mechanism to counteract reality distortion, while professional competency enhancement and boundary setting served to reinforce credibility and reduce vulnerability to unjust criticism.

The importance of social support and formal reporting channels highlights that coping is not solely an individual process but is embedded within organizational structures. Where supportive systems were accessible, employees were more likely to pursue constructive and proactive responses. In contrast, avoidant strategies and intentions to resign reflected perceived ineffectiveness of institutional protections.

Overall, the study underscores that addressing workplace gaslighting requires both strengthening employees' psychological capacities and establishing transparent, accountable organizational mechanisms. Without structural support, even resilient employees may ultimately disengage or withdraw. Effective prevention and intervention therefore depend on integrating individual empowerment with formal organizational safeguards.

KEY WORDS

Workplace Gaslighting , Psychological Manipulation, Emotional Abuse, Defense Mechanisms, Toxic Workplace.

