

Gaslighting: Covert Control in Intimate Partner Violence

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Program scholarship to the PhD Candidate

Declarations

Statement of Originality

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that the content of this thesis is my own work. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Lillian Darke, 2nd December 2025

Authorship Attribution Statement

All five empirical chapters of this thesis were submitted for publication prior to the original thesis submission. The candidate assumed the primary role designing the studies, collecting and analysing data, writing the manuscripts, and overseeing the submission and revision processes.

At the time of the original thesis submission, Chapter 1 had already been published. Chapters 2 - 5 had been submitted for publication and were at various stages of peer review. Since the original submission, Chapters 2, 4 and 5 have now been published, and Chapter 3 has been accepted for publication. Preprints of Chapters 2 and 3 were also uploaded to the Open Science Framework (PsyArXiv). Content from Chapters 2, 3, and 5 has been presented at conferences. Apart from these publications and presentations, this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purposes.

Each empirical chapter is written as a standalone manuscript given that all had been submitted for publication. While the chapters are based on the submitted or published manuscripts, formatting and phrasing have been adjusted to align with the thesis structure. Additionally, the chapters are organised to ensure a clear and coherent narrative, rather than in chronological order. No content produced by generative AI tools has been used in the preparation of this thesis.

Publications

Chapter 1

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Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

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Supervisor Confirmation

As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I can confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.

Associate Professor Helen M. Paterson, 2nd December 2025

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a manipulative form of psychological abuse that erodes a victim-survivor's confidence in their perceptions, memories, and sense of self. Within the context of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), it is especially harmful, creating dependency and undermining a victim-survivor's ability to access support. Despite its growing visibility in public discourse, research on gaslighting remains limited and fragmented, with critical gaps in understanding its boundaries, mechanisms, impact, and implications for policy and legal contexts. This thesis addresses these gaps by defining gaslighting as a distinct phenomenon, analysing its dynamics within IPV, and exploring its broader consequences.

Although psychological abuse is increasingly recognised as a serious component of IPV, gaslighting remains poorly conceptualised in academic literature. Scholars are inconsistent in the inclusion of core defining features such as intent, repetition, and outcome, and little attention has been paid to its long-term effects on cognition and wellbeing. Public understanding of gaslighting is similarly vague, complicating efforts to raise awareness and improve recognition. These issues also extend to forensic settings, where vague or poorly defined concepts of gaslighting may significantly impact victim-survivors' access to support within existing legislation. Further, persistent gaslighting may impact victim-survivors ability to articulate their experiences due to its effects on memory and self-perception. These challenges underscore the need for a robust, evidence-based framework to understanding and examining gaslighting in research and practice.

This thesis seeks to address these gaps in understanding gaslighting by answering the central question: How can gaslighting be conceptually defined, empirically studied, and modelled to inform IPV research, policy, practice, and public awareness campaigns? The study aims to refine the conceptualisation of gaslighting by exploring its definition across disciplines and integrating perspectives from victim-survivors and professionals. It also aims to examine the

factors that shape the experience of gaslighting within IPV, develop a comprehensive model of its dynamics, and investigate public recognition and understanding. Additionally, the thesis aims to evaluate the effects of gaslighting on memory recall, confidence, and self-perception, as well as its implications for individuals navigating forensic processes.

A mixed-methods approach was used to address these aims. Chapter 1 presents a comprehensive literature review of gaslighting across disciplines and history, critically evaluating assumptions in existing literature and recommending future directions. Qualitative analysis of first-hand accounts from a large sample of victim-survivors and IPV professionals provides the basis of Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 proposes a comprehensive definition of gaslighting in IPV, identifying six critical elements of gaslighting: behaviour, outcomes, intention, repetition, subsidiary tactics, and the role of power and intimacy. Chapter 3 develops a conceptual model of gaslighting in IPV, highlighting five major findings: identifiable patterns of behaviour, the critical role of access to support, the influence of pre-existing relationship dynamics, the impact of cultural attitudes, and a range of both immediate and long-term impacts.

Chapters 4 and 5 employed experimental methods to investigate public perceptions of gaslighting and the cognitive processes it affects. Chapter 4 employed a vignette-based survey to explore public perceptions among university students, revealing vague understandings of gaslighting, as well as inconsistencies between definition and recognition in context. Chapter 5 uses an adapted memory conformity paradigm to examine how partner-led challenges to shared autobiographical memories influences recall, confidence, self-perception, and wellbeing in close relationships. Findings emphasise the potential for abusive partners to manipulate memories and confidence, alongside the complex relationship between manipulation and wellbeing.

Overall, the thesis findings show that gaslighting operates through a combination of normative pressure, cognitive manipulation, and social and cultural reinforcement, with profound impacts on victim-survivor's mental health and autonomy. While public awareness of gaslighting is increasing, widespread misconceptions hinder effective recognition and response. Improved educational initiatives may help clarify the term's meaning and boundaries, supporting bystanders, victim-survivors, and frontline responders in identifying covert abuse earlier. Legal and policy implications are explored in relation to how current frameworks address this complex form of abuse in light of recent global discussions of coercive control. Finally, the experimental findings underscore the importance of researching and addressing the gaslighting's cognitive consequences in forensic settings, where victim-survivors' challenged memories and reduced confidence may undermine their perceived credibility and outcomes.

This thesis establishes gaslighting as a distinct and harmful form of IPV, offering a clearer conceptual foundation for research and practice. It highlights the urgent need for systemic changes in how psychological abuse is understood and addressed, particularly in public education, service responses, and community support. Through examining gaslighting from multiple perspectives and methods, this research provides a roadmap for future work on the mechanisms and impacts of covert abuse, contributing to more informed strategies for prevention and intervention.

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Thesis Overview

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive and systemic issue that continues to be a significant global concern, with the United Nations (2024) reporting that one woman is killed every 10 minutes by her intimate partner or family member. Historically, IPV has largely been conceptualised as isolated instances of physical and/or sexual violence, often severe enough to result in hospitalisation (Straus, 1979). However, contemporary understandings of IPV emphasise that it is a complex and multifaceted pattern of behaviour that extends beyond physical harm. For instance, psychological abuse, economic control, stalking, and social isolation are all now acknowledged as common tactics used by perpetrators to exert power and control over their partners (Follingstad & DeHard, 2000). This shift in perspective has led an increasing number of jurisdictions worldwide to amend or introduce legislation addressing non-physical patterns of abuse, often under the broader framework of ‘coercive control’.

Coercive control refers to a systematic pattern of behaviour aimed at manipulating and controlling an intimate partner (Stark, 2007). In comparison to isolated acts of violence, coercive control represents ongoing acts of abuse that undermine a victim-survivor's autonomy and self-worth. Research has shown the profound and long-lasting harm caused by these patterns, which often surpasses the impact of situational violence (Johnson, 2008). For example, a parliamentary inquiry in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, found that many victim-survivors identified coercive control as the worst form of abuse that they had experienced with the most enduring harm (Wallace, 2021). Further, coercive control was found to be present in 99% of domestic homicide cases in Australia between 2017 and 2019, underscoring its role as a strong predictor of escalating violence (DVDR, 2020; Boxall & Morgan, 2021). Despite decades of advocacy for a more nuanced conception of IPV that accounts for more subtle patterns of control (e.g., Walker, 1979; Stark, 2012), it is only in recent years that research and legislation have begun to address the more insidious dynamics of abuse.

Part of the reason it has taken so long for research and legal systems to adapt is that, for a long time, IPV was viewed as monolithic phenomenon primarily characterised by overt acts of violence (Johnson, 2008). However, as patterns of abuse gain increasing recognition, attention is shifting towards the diverse and specific tactics used to achieve power and control. Among these, psychological abuse has proven particularly challenging to study due to its often covert and subjective nature. Historically, research has prioritised overt measurable forms of psychological abuse, such as explicit verbal threats or humiliation (Loring, 1994; Marshall, 1999). Yet, more subtle forms of psychological abuse, such as those that manipulate an individual's self-image and sense of reality, have been argued to result in more severe and enduring consequences (e.g., Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Though difficult, it is increasingly important to examine overlooked and less tangible forms of abuse that profoundly affect victim-survivors' outcomes (Johnson, 2008).

Gaslighting is a covert and insidious form of psychological abuse that has gained significant attention in recent years, even winning Merriam-Webster's 'word of the year' in 2022. Gaslighting refers to a tactic of psychological manipulation in which an individual attempts to control their intimate partner by convincing them that their thoughts, beliefs, and memories are groundless, or 'crazy' (Abramson, 2014). Despite its growing prominence in public discourse, gaslighting remains severely underexplored in IPV research. This has been compounded by the fact that the term itself is inconsistently defined and applied across both research and popular culture (Medaris, 2024). Nevertheless, behaviours associated with gaslighting are widely recognised as common tactics employed by perpetrators of IPV (e.g., Tolman, 1992; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). However, studies have only recently begun to systematically examine gaslighting as a specific form of abuse with unique and profound impacts, including its impact on self-image, autonomy, and access to support services (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019).

Scholars debate whether gaslighting is best understood as a component of coercive control or as a distinct form of psychological abuse. While some have defined gaslighting specifically as form of coercive control (March et al., 2023), others have viewed it as a method used in tandem with coercive control to "wear down" victim-survivors, making them more susceptible to manipulation (Hailes, 2022). Regardless of its classification, gaslighting's capacity to erode self-trust is central to maintaining power and control in abusive dynamics (Easteal, 2021). Given its profound impact and intertwined relationship with coercive control, gaslighting warrants closer examination as a critical component of IPV. Through exploring its unique dynamics, elements, and outcomes, research can contribute to a deeper understanding of its coercive role in IPV and inform the development of more effective policy, legislation, and front-line interventions. To note, throughout this thesis, references to practice, policy, and legislation are used solely to illustrate practical contexts in which psychological concepts may be applied. The thesis does not evaluate legal adequacy, propose legal reforms, or attempt to define criminal or civil offences. Rather, its focus is on conceptual and empirical clarification of gaslighting within psychology.

Researching gaslighting poses significant challenges due to the fragmented and limited nature of the existing literature. At the start of this thesis, there was a notable lack of consistent definitions, theoretical frameworks, and empirical paradigms to adequately study gaslighting in the context of IPV. The disjointed state of the literature created critical gaps in understanding, highlighting the need for foundational research on gaslighting. To address these gaps, the thesis endeavoured to establish a clear and consistent definition of gaslighting, model its underlying mechanisms and dynamics, and propose novel paradigms for empirical investigation. Achieving these aims required drawing on insights from multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, and communication studies, among others. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach was necessary to construct a comprehensive and integrative

framework, grounding theory in the lived-experience of those most affected by this form of abuse while also generating broader empirical evidence of its effects and outcomes. This interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach was essential for advancing research into gaslighting as a distinct and complex form of IPV, providing a foundation for more consistent and systematic studies in the future.

Each chapter of this thesis has been written as an independent manuscript, as they have either been accepted for publication or are undergoing peer-review. While each chapter addresses a distinct aspect of gaslighting within the context of IPV, together they form a cohesive exploration of the overarching research question: *How can gaslighting be conceptually defined, modelled, and empirically studied to inform IPV research, policy, legislation, and public awareness campaigns?* The thesis aims to address this question through the following aims.

Aim 1: Definitional Clarity

Chapters 1 and 2 examine *how gaslighting has been conceptualised across disciplines and history, and how its definition can be refined based on the perspectives of victim-survivors and IPV professionals*. Chapter 1, which has been published in the Journal of Family Violence (Darke et al., 2025a), provides a comprehensive literature review of the use of the term ‘gaslighting’ in research across disciplines and history. It argues for a shift away from modern psychological perspectives that focus predominantly on individual vulnerability, and advocates for reframing gaslighting as a form of coercion within IPV, as well as incorporating the role of social and cultural factors.

Chapter 2, which has been published in Psychology, Public Policy and Law (Darke et al., 2025b) builds on this by developing a comprehensive definition of gaslighting that can be applied across research and practice, and that may help inform how existing policy and legal frameworks understand this behaviour. This chapter critically reviews existing definitions of

gaslighting in the literature and draws on a large-scale qualitative survey of victim-survivors and IPV professionals for comparison. The lived experiences of those most affected by gaslighting and the views of professionals working in the field are used to inform how definitions can most effectively represent this type of abuse. The implications of different definitional components for policy and legal contexts are also explored.

Aim 2: Modelling Dynamics

Building on the conceptual work in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3, which has been accepted for publication in *Psychology, Crime and Law* (Darke et al., in press), examines *the factors that shape the experience of gaslighting within IPV and investigates how these inform a comprehensive model of gaslighting dynamics*. Using a large-scale qualitative survey, this chapter explores the range of manifestations, facilitating and inhibiting factors, and outcomes of prolonged gaslighting within IPV. These findings are synthesised into a conceptual model that considers the individual, relational, and ecological factors influencing the experience of gaslighting. This model provides a foundation for future research, policy development, and public awareness campaigns.

Aim 3: Public Perceptions

Given the widespread popularity of the term ‘gaslighting’ in popular culture, Chapter 4 investigates *how gaslighting is recognised and defined by the broader public*. This chapter was published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (Darke et al., 2025c), and evaluates how readily individuals identify and condemn gaslighting behaviours and whether their understandings align with the critical components identified in the qualitative studies of Chapters 2 and 3. Using an experimental vignette design, this study examines how a young adult sample defines and responds to various presentations of gaslighting. It also addresses how their attitudes towards gaslighting influence their evaluations. The findings inform the

development of future public awareness campaigns, particularly those targeting young adult audiences.

Aim 4: Cognitive Mechanisms

Finally, given the increasing recognition of coercive and psychologically abusive behaviours in legal contexts, Chapter 5 examines *the impact of gaslighting on recall and self-perception*, factors that are critical to the perceived credibility of victim-survivors in court settings. This chapter was published in *Memory* (Darke et al., 2025d). Building on Chapter 3, which demonstrates the profound cognitive impacts of gaslighting, Chapter 5 employs a novel experimental paradigm to study the effects of inter-partner memory challenges on participants' recall, confidence, and self-perceptions. Conducted in a laboratory setting, this study provides a framework for understanding how gaslighting affects memory-related domains. The findings offer initial insights into the dynamics and outcomes of gaslighting and offers a paradigm for future studies to investigate potential interventions or supports for victim-survivors in legal settings to ensure more equitable outcomes during forensic procedures.

Through addressing these four key aims, this thesis seeks to provide a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding gaslighting, its dynamics, mechanisms, and impacts. Ultimately, it aims to contribute to IPV research, policy, and practice addressing covert abuse. The theoretical and practical contributions will be assessed in each individual study and further examined in the general discussion (Chapter 6).

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Preface

The content of this chapter is based on an article published in the Journal of Family Violence. Darke, L. Paterson, H. and van Golde, C. (2025) Illuminating Gaslighting: A Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Review of Gaslighting Literature. *Journal of Family Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-025-00805-4>

Abstract

Purpose: With the rise of coercive control legislation in Australia and the UK, it has become increasingly important to clarify the discourse surrounding common psychological abuse tactics, such as gaslighting. This literature review seeks to aid future research in conceptualising gaslighting by exploring its complex nature and tracing its evolution across different fields. The primary aim is to compile and synthesise research from various disciplines, enhancing cross-field communication and providing a clearer understanding of the term's origins and potential future applications. **Method:** This literature review synthesises existing research on gaslighting by examining its evolution and operationalisation across multiple fields, including medicine, psychiatry, psychodynamics, psychology and individual differences, sociology, and philosophy. **Results:** The review reveals significant inconsistencies in the operationalisation of gaslighting across various fields, such as framing gaslighting as a type of family abuse used for personal or material gain, a form of interpersonal communication between couples, and an expression of structural power. It underscores the need for a stronger theoretical basis in empirical research on gaslighting and recommends moving away from the current focus on individual differences prevalent in empirical studies. **Conclusion:** By providing a comprehensive synthesis of existing research, this review shines a light on the shifting conceptualisation of gaslighting. It emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary communication and the need for a more robust theoretical framework to improve empirical

studies. Such a unified understanding is also important for informing the development and application of legal and psychological responses to gaslighting and other forms of psychological abuse within existing systems.

Introduction

With the recent introduction of coercive control offences in the UK in 2015 (*Serious Crime Act 2015 (UK)*) and Australia in 2022 (*Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022 (NSW)*), non-physical patterns of abuse have received increasing attention both within research and among the broader community. While the criminalisation of intimate partner violence (IPV) has historically focused on physical forms of abuse (McMahon & McGorry, 2017), there has been an increase in interest in the role of covert and insidious forms of violence, such as emotional and psychological abuse.

Coercive control can be defined as a pattern of behaviour that is designed to exert power over an individual (AIHW, 2024). This includes a wide range of tactics that control individuals through intimidation, humiliation, and isolation (Katz, 2015; Stark, 2007). An Australian parliamentary inquiry into family and domestic violence found that victim-survivors often describe coercive control as ‘the worst form of abuse they experience and can have more immediate and ongoing impacts than physical forms of violence’ (Wallace, 2021, pp.103-104). Further, the Australian Death Review Team found in New South Wales, 99% of Domestic Violence homicides between 2008 and 2016 were preceded by coercive control (Ward, 2021). Therefore, not only does coercive control have the capacity to inflict long-lasting trauma, but it also acts as a strong predictor of future physical abuse (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). It is thus an important endeavour to identify and establish coercive patterns of behaviour, as this may lead to better identification of at-risk victims, less chance of re-abuse, and faster court cases (Ditcher et al., 2019; Klein, 2009).

Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse that has had a stark increase in public discourse, within a short period of time. Most notably, gaslighting was voted ‘word of the year’ in the Merriam Websters Dictionary in 2022. Gaslighting can be defined as a tactic of psychological manipulation in which an individual attempts to control their intimate partner by convincing them that their thoughts, beliefs, and memories are groundless, or ‘crazy’ (Abramson, 2014). While the term has peaked in popularity over the past few years, gaslighting’ originated from the titular 1938 play ‘Gas Light’. In this play, a husband intentionally convinces his wife that she is losing her mind by convincing her that real changes to her physical surroundings, such as moving objects and illumination of the gas lights, are not happening. The goal of this manipulation was to convince the wife that she requires institutionalisation, so the husband could have unfettered access to her fortune (Hamilton, 1939).

Since the inception of the term, gaslighting has been used in numerous contexts, ranging from interpersonal relationships to cults (Dorpat, 1996). There is some initial evidence that gaslighting may play a considerable role in the experience of IPV. In the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) undertook a survey of 2,875 individuals experiencing intimate partner violence (Warshaw et al., 2014). When asked “Has your partner or ex-partner ever called you “crazy” or accused you of being “crazy”?”, 85.7% of respondents answered positively. Further, 73.8% of respondents said that they believed their partner had deliberately done things to make them feel like they were going crazy, and 50.2% said that their partner had threatened to tell the authorities that they were ‘crazy’ to prevent them from accessing services such as protective orders.

Despite a recent surge in specific research on gaslighting, gaslighting theory remains relatively underdeveloped and excluded from broad models of IPV. Even so, elements of gaslighting have been present in IPV research for many years. Concepts such as 'surreality',

'unreality', 'dismissive incomprehension', 'crazy making', or 'narcissistic flip' have been discussed in prior studies (Ferraro, 2006; Williamson, 2010; Cull, 2019; Hayes and Jeffries, 2016; Korobov, 2020). In general, there is recognition of the important role that psychological tactics which challenge and warp reality play in patterns of abuse. For instance, the Duluth Power and Control Wheel identifies controlling behaviours such as minimising, denial, and blame, which has a large overlap with typical gaslighting tactics (Pence & Paymar, 1993; Hailes, 2022).

As Hailes (2022) argued in a review of coercive control theory and gaslighting, the relationship between gaslighting and direct coercion varies depending on the definition and the details of individual cases. Hailes (2022) noted that gaslighting may serve as a direct tactic of coercion within intimate relationships, however, it can also be used with the intention of enacting harm instead of control. This harm may wear a person down over time, increasing their vulnerability to coercive control (Hailes, 2022; Dutton & Goodman, 2005). Regardless of whether gaslighting is conceptualised as a form of coercive control, or as a pattern of abuse alongside coercive control, it plays an important role in contributing to the cumulative negative impacts of IPV. Greater conceptual clarity about gaslighting is therefore important within psychological research, particularly for enhancing identification by practitioners, police, and service providers who work within existing legal frameworks.

Even with the increase in gaslighting studies in recent years, the definition and operationalisation of gaslighting has remained inconsistent and unclear. For instance, there is inconsistency in whether gaslighting is described as an intentional act (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Roberts & Andrews, 2013), a repeated act (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Graves & Samp, 2021), or whether outcomes, such as self-doubt, are necessary for gaslighting to have occurred (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Catapang Podosky, 2021). These are important points of contention in the literature, as they have significant implications for the definition and operationalisation of

gaslighting within existing legal and policy frameworks. This ambiguity may partially stem from the irregular and slow advancements in gaslighting research. It may also, however, be attributed to the lack of interdisciplinary communication of research concepts and findings. For instance, while individual authors may have specific views on what gaslighting entails, they do not necessarily agree with or reference other researchers within or across their disciplines. Although the first case studies emerged from psychiatry (i.e., Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Smith & Sinanan, 1972), the term has transcended disciplinary boundaries, as it has been applied within the domains of psychodynamics, individual differences, philosophy, and sociology (e.g., Hightower, 2017; March et al., 2023; Sodoma, 2022; Sweet 2019). While there have been important theoretical and empirical developments within these disciplines, to date the most cited literature remains Stern's self-help book 'The Gaslight Effect' from 2007.

In order for future research to establish a coherent framework by which to understand the phenomenon of gaslighting, the current paper aims to conduct a comprehensive review of existing approaches towards gaslighting across disciplines, commencing with a historical overview of the topic and subsequent conceptual advancements. Particularly, it is important to establish the discrepancies that emerge from its interdisciplinary application and assess the implications for future use of gaslighting in research and policy. As a note on terminology, while this review utilises the term 'victim-survivor' when referring to individuals who are currently or have previously experienced IPV, it will use the term 'victim' and 'perpetrator' when discussing theoretical gaslighting, to maintain conceptual clarity (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; March et al., 2023).

Historical Use of Gaslighting

The first investigation into gaslighting was published by Barton and Whitehead in the 1969 edition of the *Lancet*. Barton and Whitehead took inspiration from the play 'The Gas Light' and noted the lack of representation of this plot within the medical literature. The article

consisted of three case studies that demonstrated attempts to admit an individual to hospital under false accusations of mental health disturbances. The first two cases involved male victims, where wives admitted their husbands under claims of aggression or alcoholism, as a means to divorce. The third case involved a staff member of a nursing home providing an elderly woman with medication to cause incontinence, so as to remove her from the home into a hospital. In all three cases, the focus of the gaslighting was on removing the individual from the household, to provide a solution to interpersonal problems or for personal gain. The target of the manipulation in these cases were the hospital staff, and surrounding friends and family. While each case briefly mentions some taunting of the victim by the family, such as telling them they are 'mad' and should be in hospital, the victims did not present with, or develop notable symptoms of "physical or mental disease" (Barton & Whitehead, 1969, p1258).

In response to the Barton and Whitehead (1969) paper, Smith and Sinanan (1972) introduced cases where the situation extended beyond direct admission to psychiatric hospitals. The women in their case studies were first admitted into the general hospital with physical health presentations. In both cases the husbands exaggerated their wives' illnesses and falsified information which led to psychiatric teams being called in. As with the Barton and Whitehead (1969) study, attempts to convince the wife they were losing their mind were minimal and secondary to attempts to convince the hospital staff. Smith and Sinanan (1972) noted that the cases stood in contrast to the play, in which the wife was driven to believe that she was 'going mad' which, in turn, strengthened the case to have her admitted. A later case study reported by Lund and Gardiner (1977) was more closely aligned to the play because the elderly patient developed paranoid psychosis induced by hospital staff. While in the previous cases, families worked to invoke the perception of insanity with an otherwise healthy individual, in this case the victim had a history of psychosis which was known to those involved. Lund and Gardiner

(1977) used this case to argue for the importance of remaining critical when provided with 'seemingly impartial' mental health history from concerned relatives.

Up until this point, gaslighting case studies framed gaslighting as malicious and intentional behaviour used to rid a family of unwanted individuals. In 1987 Cawthra, O'Brian, and Hassanyeh introduced a more complex case, in which the motivation for the gaslighting was not as direct or malicious. The case involved a daughter, who pretended to be the ghost of her mother's late husband. The young woman used the authority of the husband's ghost to ask for things that she herself did not feel she have the authority to request, such as the right to move out of home. It wasn't until after the daughter moved out that the mother began to experience distress regarding the sudden disappearance of her late husband's ghost. Upon being interviewed by the hospital, the girl quickly revealed the truth about her manipulation and its unintended consequences.

Cawthra et al., (1987) were the first to describe a case where gaslighting did not have the goal of hospitalising the victim. Gass and Nichols (1988), and Calef and Weinshel (1981) also extended the concept of gaslighting to a more general form of manipulation within relationships. Gass and Nichols (1988) were particularly interested in common behaviours that men enact within relationships, when they are involved in extramarital affairs. They acknowledged that gaslighting may not always start as a malicious attempt to drive someone mad, but rather, to avoid accountability. They noted common lying and distortion behaviours they observed among cheating husbands which, regardless of intention, challenged the perceptions and reality of their wives. Further, they noted the role of male therapists in enabling and reinforcing gaslighting, through mislabelling women's reactions to this deception as insecurity or jealousy.

This more general interpretation of gaslighting was reflected in case studies reported by Calef and Weinshel (1981). In these, the similarity between the gaslighting literature and

contemporary literature on schizophrenia was noted. While gaslighting literature at the time had focused on convincing hospital staff of a patient's "insanity", schizophrenia studies had independently investigated the phenomenon whereby patients with schizophrenia "externalize their psychosis" in an attempt to drive those around them psychotic (e.g., Laing, 1960; Searles, 1965). Calef and Weinshel (1981) investigated the relationship between these two fields and argued for a broader view of gaslighting, whereby the aim of the gaslighting may be to genuinely drive the victim of gaslighting 'crazy'. Their conception of gaslighting included a large spectrum of behaviours and responses, not limited to psychosis. They believed that gaslighting was more ubiquitous across society than had previously been acknowledged, alluding to modern practices in the media such as 'subliminal perception advertising'.

The concept of gaslighting, at this point, evolved beyond describing wrongful hospital admissions and transformed into a broader and more ambiguous phenomenon that encompassed 'normal' relationships and interactions. This broad perspective was the impetus for Dorpat's (1996) book which investigated gaslighting in psychotherapy. Dorpat viewed gaslighting as a fundamental technique of communication and manipulation, conscious or unconscious, across broad contexts ranging from romantic relationships to propaganda and cults. As Dorpat argued, gaslighting is used extensively because it is an effective tool to exert control over an individual. Dorpat was particularly interested in the way in which therapists can unintentionally gaslight, due to the power and control that psychotherapists have over their patients. Dorpat (1996) along with other authors who studies the phenomenon of gaslighting through a psychodynamic lens (i.e., Cawthra et al., 1987; Calef & Weinshel, 1981) contributed to a psychodynamic framing of gaslighting that has continued to persist in the current literature.

Psychology and Psychodynamic Theory

Beginning with Calef and Weinshel (1981), gaslighting researchers began to express interest in the role of intrapsychic mechanisms within the gaslighting process. Specifically,

viewing gaslighting as a phenomenon whereby both parties are (consciously or not) complicit in the process. While both Dorpat (1996) and Calef and Weinshel (1981) noted that there are many individual defence mechanisms at play in gaslighting (e.g., projection and denial), they were particularly interested in the explanatory power of ‘projective identification’. Projective identification, a term originated by Klein (1946), defined a process whereby an individual projects unwanted parts of the self onto a target who, in turn, identifies with this content. As Calef and Weinshel (1981) argued, this process can be similar to gaslighting, that is, a gaslighter projects some of their unwanted ‘psychic content’ onto another person, and pressures them to accept and identify with that content (Dorpat, 1996). This concept has continued to be a popular theoretical lens for viewing gaslighting and has been used across gaslighting articles since 1981 (e.g., Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Hightower, 2017; Graves & Samps, 2021). A history of the term, and its application to gaslighting can be found in Hightower’s (2017) thesis.

The term, however, has not been without controversy. As with ‘gaslighting’, ‘projective identification’ can be interpreted in many ways and its extensive usage across different literatures has diminished clarity and explanatory power (Braddock, 2018). Even within the limited gaslighting literature, there are competing interpretations. Abramson (2014) drew issue with the use of projective identification to understand gaslighting, as gaslighters often project ideas onto their victims that are not limited to the gaslighter’s specific anxieties, and which can impact the victim beyond the topic being projected. However, Calef and Weinshel (1981) noted that the gaslighting process is complex, and involves an interplay of different psychic apparatus, and levels of consciousness. Projective identification, through their account, can be viewed as just one mechanism by which gaslighting is enacted.

Abramson (2014) argued that one of the key theoretical benefits of projective identification is that it suggests, in a general sense, that an individual can relieve their anxiety by forcing the external reality to change in order to suit it. In other words, convincing others

that the victim is ‘unhinged’ is not enough, rather the perpetrator must actually ‘unhinge’ the victim to alleviate their anxieties. Regardless of where researchers sit on the use of psychodynamic theory as a lens for explaining gaslighting, it appears to have shifted the focus of gaslighting research from family behavioural patterns to a focus on individuals and their internal processes.

Psychology and Individual Differences

The Gaslight Effect by Stern (2007) is a popular self-help book for individuals in emotionally abusive relationships and remains the most cited gaslighting literature to this day. The book draws from cases and reflections that the author collected throughout her career as a psychotherapist. Stern (2007) focused primarily on the dual role that the target and perpetrator play in gaslighting. The gaslighting interaction was framed as a ‘tango’ in which both participants must be willing in order for the manipulation to be successful. This willingness, while not always conscious, was theorised to be driven by individual traits and motivations. Thus, gaslighting includes a victim who must be willing to change their point of view in order to attain the approval of their partner, and a partner who is determined to always be right. Through this conception of gaslighting, Stern (2007) created a typology of perpetrators, and the traits of people who are likely to be victimised by them. The perpetrator typology included three types: the ‘glamour’ gaslighter, the ‘good guy’ gaslighter, and the ‘intimidator’ gaslighter. These three types were differentiated by their motives and common tactics. However, it was noted that perpetrators can constantly switch between these types, and victims themselves can sometimes become the perpetrators. The victims, on the other hand, were characterised as having common beliefs and values such as needing to be understood, wanting to preserve the relationship, worrying about not being good enough, or high levels of empathy. Stern argued that gaslighting plays on these desires or anxieties and motivates individuals to justify and accept their partner’s behaviours.

Despite the frequency with which Stern's (2007) victim traits are cited, there is a relative lack of empirical evidence that specific individuals are more or less vulnerable to gaslighting. In one empirical study, inspired by Stern's 'it takes two to tango' conception of gaslighting, Hightower (2017) endeavoured to find evidence for traits that may leave individuals vulnerable to victimisation. She argued that certain descriptors were common across case studies (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem). Citing psychodynamic theory, Hightower focused on the traits of high sensory processing, intolerance for uncertainty, and neuroticism. She disseminated an online questionnaire that utilised the 'Are You Being Gaslighted?' quiz taken from Stern's (2007) book, alongside validated measures of psychological abuse and the three hypothesised traits. While the author did note that the results of the study were ultimately underpowered, there was some evidence that these three traits were correlated with Stern's (2007) measurement of gaslighting.

This investigation into vulnerability traits was continued by Miano et al., (2021) in their online survey of young Italian students. Miano et al., (2021) aimed to identify the 'dysfunctional personality domains' of abusers and victim-survivors by providing an online questionnaire that also utilised the 'Are You Being Gaslighted?' quiz from Stern (2007), as well as her three 'gaslighter typology' quizzes. The online questionnaire was provided to self-identified victim-survivors of gaslighting, and the perpetrator data was gathered by asking the victim-survivors to act as an informant and respond on behalf of their abuser. The responses to these scales were measured against victim-survivor and informant responses to the DSM-5 personality inventory. The study reported that both the victim-survivors and the perpetrators exhibited traits such as psychoticism and disinhibition. Further, certain traits were differentially associated with Stern's gaslighter typology (e.g., disinhibition was more associated with 'good guy' gaslighters), or the type of gaslighting that someone may fall victim to (e.g., victim-survivors high on psychoticism were more likely to be victimised by intimidator gaslighters).

The results indicated that victim-survivor and perpetrator traits can be differently associated with approaches to gaslighting relationships, and specifically, the three typologies from Stern's (2007) book.

A major limitation of the Miano et al. (2021) study was its inability to distinguish between traits that preceded a relationship and those that result from abusive dynamics (see Dutton, 2000). Although Miano et al., (2021) acknowledged this issue, the study still concluded that gaslighting victim-survivor traits serve as relationship precursors. While Miano et al. undertook a significant initial step in examining perpetrator traits, a further limitation of the study was the use of victim-survivor informant reports on behalf of perpetrators. This limitation does, however, highlight the importance and potential challenges in identifying and researching perpetrators of gaslighting firsthand.

March et al. (2023) aimed to address this limitation by investigating the relationship between acceptance of gaslighting behaviour, and the dark tetrad personality traits (i.e., narcissism, machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism). The study did not interview people who are known perpetrators of gaslighting but measured a general population sample and their predisposition towards perpetration through how 'acceptable' the respondents rated gaslighting behaviours on an 'acceptance of gaslighting' scale. This scale was based on Stern's (2007) "Am I being Gaslighted" quiz and a review of the literature. The study found that individuals who found gaslighting more acceptable rated higher on dark tetrad traits such as sadism and machiavellianism. It was, thus, concluded that gaslighting perpetration is intentional and manipulative in its motivation. It was unclear, however, which elements of the literature were used to modify Stern's scale. The items from the scale used by March et al (2023) appear to heavily draw on a manipulative conception of gaslighting (e.g., Person A lies to Person B just to see if Person B will believe them; Person A says anything to Person B if it means that they will get their way). It is therefore not surprising that this scale correlated with the dark tetrad,

as the manipulative motivations and behaviours described in the items are reminiscent of the dark tetrad. The study's conclusion that gaslighting is intentional and manipulative, therefore may be premature as other motivations for gaslighting were not investigated or included. In spite of the difficulty, future research would benefit from gaining insight into the motivation behind gaslighting perpetration, such as through a more open investigation involving individuals known to perpetrate gaslighting in IPV.

Intriguingly, a constant feature in all studies of individual differences and gaslighting, is the use of Stern's (2007) 'Am I Being Gaslighted?' quiz. As discussed in the studies above, this quiz has been used to measure both victimisation (i.e., outcomes of gaslighting) and perpetration (i.e., tactics and behaviours of gaslighting). Despite its ubiquity, the 20-item quiz has no established psychometric properties. It was included at the beginning of the Stern (2007) self-help book as a tool to encourage reflection from individuals who believe they may be experiencing emotional abuse. The scale was not designed to directly measure gaslighting, nor be utilised as a validated measure in research (see Boateng et al., 2018). Quiz items describe a variety of factors including some that are not directly related to gaslighting (e.g., you feel hopeless and joyless). Stern's use of the three gaslighter archetypes, that is the 'good guy' (e.g., appears to be kind and attentive, but is consistently undermining), 'glamour' (e.g., intermittent demonstrations of over-the-top affection and coldness) and 'intimidator' (e.g., using intimidation to coerce and force agreement) were similarly developed through observation, and not empirically tested. Despite this, her quizzes which describe common behaviours from these three archetypes, have also been used in gaslighting perpetration research (i.e., Miano et al., 2021; Li and Samp, 2023). It is not surprising, therefore, that research that utilises the three archetypes has found inconsistent and mixed results, especially given Stern (2007) herself argues that these archetypes are fluid and subject to change across context.

It is important to establish a strong theoretical basis for gaslighting measures, grounded in the experiences of victims-survivors and gaslighting perpetrators. Further, basing these measures on a consistent definition of gaslighting is particularly important if researchers aim to draw robust and reliable conclusions across studies. To date, this kind of research has rarely been conducted. Bhatti et al. (2021) is one of the first studies which endeavoured to establish a validated tool to measure the severity of gaslighting, amongst victim-survivors. Bhatti et al., (2021) utilised a focus group of eight female victim-survivors of gaslighting as a basis for developing a scale of victim experience. The scale was developed through thematic analysis of the focus group interview, and then reviewed by a panel of psychologists. The scale established two factors that underlie the experience of being gaslit, peer disagreement (i.e., experiences of being challenged by peers) and loss of self-trust. While this study provided an important step in the right direction by including victim-survivors in the development of gaslighting tools, the development process of this scale was opaque and did not appear to be strongly rooted in gaslighting literature (Hailes, 2022).

An important theoretical dilemma that exists in the individual differences approach to gaslighting is that it is based on the assumption that victimisation in gaslighting stems from the victim-survivor's 'dysfunctional personality domains' (Miano et al., 2021). However, given the gaslighting literature is still in its early stages, and lacks consistency in its definition, there is insufficient evidence to justify this assumption. In fact, the few gaslighting studies that are grounded in the lived experiences of victim-survivors focus more upon the vulnerabilities that are created through interpersonal, social-cultural, and structural factors (e.g., power differences, gender roles, institutional vulnerabilities), rather than focusing upon personality traits that may cause vulnerability (i.e., Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022; Klein, Li, and Wood, 2023). While contemporary psychology research on gaslighting beyond personality traits is limited, some initial studies have suggested associations between gaslighting victimisation, power

disparities (Graves and Samp, 2021), and emotional leverage (Badouk Epstein, 2019). Therefore, understanding the coercive and controlling role of gaslighting within relationships may hold more clinical and practical relevance than focusing on individual traits that cause vulnerability.

Social and Cultural Gaslighting

Given the recent surge in the popularity of the term gaslighting, scholars across a variety of disciplines have begun exploring its capacity to provide insights into social-cultural phenomena. Interest in applying gaslighting to the context of broader social structures is understandable, given that gaslighting incorporates subtle control tactics aimed at silencing resistance (Davis & Ernst, 2019). This can be seen as reminiscent of structural silencing, such as the repression of minority voices and promotion of dominant narratives. Gaslighting has been applied to a wide berth of institutions ranging from medical institutions (Field-Springer et al., 2021), workplaces (e.g., Rodrigues et al., 2021), mass media (Tobias & Joseph, 2020), and politics (Sinha, 2020). While there is great explanatory power in gaslighting within these contexts, Ruiz (2019) warned against the overuse of the traditional interpersonal conception of gaslighting to understand issues of cultural and structural inequalities. By placing the focus on interpersonal abuse within individual cases, the broader structural inequalities that enable this ongoing abuse of specific populations may go unexamined. As such, scholars have endeavoured to create gaslighting adjacent terms which consider the role of broader structures in the process of oppression, such as Racial Gaslighting (Davis & Ernst, 2019), Cultural Gaslighting (Ruiz, 2019), and Structural Gaslighting (Berenstain, 2020).

Davis and Ernst (2019) coined the term ‘Racial Gaslighting’ to describe “the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist” (p. 761). While reviewing case studies of police brutality and racial profiling by the Hamilton police department in Ontario,

Canada, as well as the local media, Tobias and Joseph (2020) observed that the discourse surrounding these cases often framed the issues as individual-level problems, as opposed to acknowledging the historical and social issues underlying them. While the prolonged effects of gaslighting exhausts marginalised groups by undermining and overlooking their voices, Tobias and Joseph argue that its effectiveness lies in people's unawareness of the process. Rodrigues et al., (2021) reviewed the experiences of women of colour in the academic workplace through focus groups. They found that the participants often felt isolated at work due to the lack of representation of women of colour in academia. Participants in these groups identified instances of gaslighting when colleagues would dismiss and minimise their experiences of bias or discrimination. The isolation from other women of colour intensified the psychological impact of the discrimination, further contributing to the internalisation of gaslighting. However, access to social support played a crucial role in contextualising the gaslighting and discerning the patterns through which sexism and racism was being enacted.

Much like the original psychiatry case studies, the impact of racial gaslighting extends beyond the specific individual or group featured in the gaslighting narrative. As in Barton and Whitehead's (1969) case studies where the gaslighting narrative centred around a family member, the aim was to manipulate the perspective of the hospital staff. Racial gaslighting is not intended solely for the impact on the minority groups it affects, rather, it can be directed at a broader audience. In a case study analysed by Roberts and Andrews (2013), gaslighting was targeting the discourse surrounding African American teachers in the United States. Through reviewing the historical circumstances that led to the shortage of African American teachers in the current day, they identified a predominant cultural narrative which wrongly placed blame on black communities. While African American teachers suffer the consequences of this narrative, Roberts and Andrews (2013) argued that, paradoxically, white

Americans are the targets of the gaslighting. The teachers in this case were casualties, in an effort to win favour with the target audience i.e., the white American voters.

Social-cultural gaslighting can manifest in deliberate and targeted campaigns, as observed in the case studies of Racial Gaslighting. It has also, however, been argued to occur in everyday interactions enacted through prevailing social norms and values. Berenstein (2020) contended that structural gaslighting occurs when individuals, intentionally or not, invoke the dominant narratives that underly oppression. This phenomenon can occur in heteronormative narratives and interactions with allies, as highlighted by a hypothetical case study described by McKinnon (2019). McKinnon emphasised how individuals often profess allyship but retract their support when confronted with the need to challenge their pre-existing belief. For example, making comments such as 'I'm sure you just misheard him', in response to individuals describing experiences of discrimination. Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) reflected on this discrepancy when reviewing their experiences providing therapy to parents with transgender children. They noted a disconnect between the verbal support the parents provided their children, and their actions which often undermined the child's identity. These actions may involve seeking a diagnosis to validate the child's gender identity or placing their emotional burden on the child. Wozolek (2018) further explored these dynamics within the schooling system. They observed classroom behaviours that undermined the experiences of transgender children, such as expecting transgender people to open their lives and identities for debate, or conflating being transgender with a 'mental health problem'. While the behaviours of the individuals in these cases may not be intended to gaslight, Wozolek (2018) argued that they are driven by a broader social cultural narrative that is, in itself, deliberate.

Tobias and Joseph (2020) argued that tactics like gaslighting exert the most control when they remain invisible to the victims. Introducing terms that can describe and identify this systematic form of abuse provides tools of resistance for the individuals it aims to control.

Denying reality and replacing it with preferred narratives is a common strategy of oppression, and thus it is important to develop frameworks for understanding these tactics and their role in control and manipulation of populations on a broader scale. Sweet (2019), however, saw the importance of separating interpersonal definitions of gaslighting, and broader descriptions of reality manipulation such as ‘political gaslighting’. Sinah (2020) defined political gaslighting as “trafficking in dubious or outright false information about matters of public significance by a politician or political apparatus when the speaker knows or should reasonably know that the information is likely to be incorrect, and the audience has a reasonable basis for doubting the speaker’s claims” (p.1092). The audience must be placed in a dilemma between believing and not believing the speaker, for it to merit the term ‘political gaslighting’. Sweet (2019) contended that the public possesses too much power to be gaslit. According to Sweet (2019) gaslighting requires power-differentials that bind the victim to the gaslighter and an inability to push counter-narratives. However, these political tactics clearly draw influence from gaslighting strategies, underscoring their capacity to disempower individuals through framing their voices and narratives as irrational. While psychology studies often attribute gaslighting to individual traits that influence susceptibility (e.g., Hightower, 2017), sociologists and philosophers argue against viewing gaslighting as a strategy that exists within a vacuum (Abramson, 2014; Sweet, 2019). Rather, they stress the importance of considering how gaslighting capitalises on broader structures of power and inequality.

Gaslighting and Gender

The relationship between gaslighting and gender has been the subject of debate within the literature. Therapists, Sarkis (2018) and Stern (2007), reflecting on their experience providing counselling, noted that gaslighting is a tactic with the potential to be used by, or weaponised against individuals of any gender identity. While the original case studies of gaslighting included a mixture of male and female victims and perpetrators, theories of

gaslighting within the context of intimate partner violence have become increasingly gendered (e.g., Abramson, 2014). There have been some initial investigations into rates of gaslighting amongst women experiencing IPV (Warshaw et al., 2014) and men's experience of gaslighting among other psychological forms of abuse (Bates, 2020). However, to date there are no prevalence studies of gaslighting disaggregated by gender. This makes it difficult to conclude if women or men are experiencing gaslighting at higher rates, or if it is, indeed, equally utilised across gender identity. While Miano et al., (2021) has been cited for their initial attempts to identify gender or age differences in gaslighting in their individual differences study, their sample consisted only of young adults and an even mix of male and female self-identified gaslighting victim-survivors. Due to these sample limitations, it is not possible to draw strong conclusions about rates of gaslighting perpetration or victimisation across the broader population.

The gendered perpetration of psychological abuse is a complex research area, with an array of debates and mixed findings. While there has been evidence to suggest that psychological abuse is perpetrated equally across genders (Renner & Whitney, 2010), the use of psychological abuse against female victim-survivors often results in more severe outcomes (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). Even so, it is important to consider methodological limitations in researching male victim-survivors of violence (e.g., underreporting, a general female victim-survivor focus) and how these may impact upon our current understanding of psychological outcomes of abuse. When considering the impact of psychological abuse on victim outcomes, sociological researchers have emphasised the importance of considering the ecological and structural inequalities that enable and underly these tactics. While it is the case that Stern (2007) and Sarkis (2018) acknowledged the potential of gaslighting to be weaponised by any gender, they also saw a higher rate of female victim-survivors of gaslighting in their practices and these female clients experienced more detrimental impacts compared to their male counterparts.

Sweet (2019) has been openly critical of existing psychological approaches of gaslighting. Specifically, their inability to account for the macro-level inequalities which have direct impacts upon the tactics of abuse enacted within interpersonal relationships. In order to address this, she undertook a sociological approach to gaslighting, and its relationships to broader structures of power.

To better understand the mechanisms and processes through which gaslighting is enacted, Sweet (2019) conducted interviews with forty-eight survivors of domestic violence. Through these interviews, Sweet identified two key impacts that gender and intersecting inequalities had on a victim-survivor experience of gaslighting. The first of this is the ability to weaponise gender-based stereotypes (e.g., the hysterical woman and the rational man), which is further enforced through the 'institutional vulnerabilities' that women experience. These 'institutional vulnerabilities' are driven by inequality in the way women are perceived and treated in institutions, such as immigration, police, courts, mental health services. For instance, Sweet (2019) described interviews in which women's experience of domestic abuse were reinforced through immigration services, as they rely upon sexual relationships in order to retain legal status within the country.

Sweet (2019) argued that the ability to leverage gender norms and stereotypes leaves women disproportionately vulnerable to gaslighting. There are forms of leverage that are more easily accessible by men, which can be used against women, such as the ability to dismiss an individual as 'crazy' or 'hysterical'. Historically, the dismissal of women as hysterical, highly emotional, or out of control was seen across a wide range of institutions ranging from the medical industry to the justice system (Metzl, 2003; Douglas, 2012). For example, a study by Maserejian et al., (2009) found that women who experienced the same cardiac arrest symptoms as men were twice as likely (31.3%) to be misdiagnosed as experiencing a mental health condition.

The use of these gendered norms and stereotypes to coerce women was addressed in Abramson's (2014) influential philosophical review of gaslighting. Abramson argued that while gaslighting is not inherently sexist, it relies upon internalised sexist norms to be effective. This could take place through more tangible inequalities such as traditional gender roles within relationships, which place women in a subordinate position to their male partner. It can also take place through less direct avenues, such as women's relationship with self-doubt and their capacity as 'knowers'. This is not to say that men cannot experience power differentials that position their knowledge as subordinate to their abuser (e.g., boss-employee relations).

The role of power and 'outsiderness' in an individuals' capacity to generate knowledge has been investigated and reviewed by feminist researchers for decades. Portnow (1996) conducted interviews with men and women about their experiences of self-trust and found that women, or men who experienced life as an 'outsider', would find it increasingly dangerous or difficult to stand by their knowledge if it went against the social norms. They would develop what Portnow called 'dispositional doubt', in which they would forfeit their identity and capacity for generating knowledge, in exchange for entrance into the community. Stern (2007) noted that she had observed an increase in gaslighting clientele in recent years and argued that this may be reflective of backlash against the changing roles of women within the community, as they attempt to gain more independence and removal from traditional roles.

Sarkis (2018) argued that the discreditation of women by men goes both ways in its capacity to harm. That is, we are less likely to hear of female perpetrators of gaslighting as their attempts at abuse, and their impact upon men, are not taken as seriously as they should be. Despite this, Sweet (2019) and Abramson (2014) argued that the leverage that men often have over their female counterparts make women more likely to be victimised than men. Sweet (2019) observed instances where male perpetrators relied upon their access to 'rationality' and stereotypes of female irrationality to persuade police not to take their partners complaints

seriously. In turn, these institutional vulnerabilities isolate women and prevents them from accessing or relying upon institutional supports. These findings have been replicated through recent interviews with victim-survivors of psychological abuse (Hailes, 2022), in which women continue to emphasise the role that stereotypes and intersecting inequalities (i.e., gender, race, health, and immigration status) play in their experience of gaslighting. Further, there has been evidence that while women may enact abusive tactics towards their male partners, men are less likely to change their behaviour or be intimidated by these tactics (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Ross, 2012). In Gass and Nichols' (1988) original case studies, they asserted that provided societal double standards, dependencies, and variations in the upbringing of men and women persist, we should anticipate that women will endure more severe consequences in relationships and continue to be treated unfairly by professionals and supporting institutions.

Philosophy, Justice, and the Social Function of Gaslighting

There have been a few philosophical analyses of gaslighting, and the social function that it plays in conversation. Catapang Podosky (2021) was interested in the way in which gaslighting can be used to cause someone to question their reality. The analysis conceptualised two types of gaslighting, with differing impacts upon victims' perception of self. First-order gaslighting described speech acts which cause an individual to question whether they have accurately applied a concept to a specific situation e.g., 'in this instance, that behaviour does not constitute sexual assault'. Second order gaslighting, on the other hand, was used to describe speech acts which cause an individual to question their ability to understand the concept at all e.g., 'that is too trivial to be considered sexual assault'. Catapang Podosky argued that while first order gaslighting is common and well understood, second order gaslighting was more impactful. The key purpose of this more severe form of gaslighting speech acts is to deprive someone from their right to participate in conversations about what constitutes a concept or shared experience. The ongoing impact of this denial is to impart to someone that they are

unable to trust their own conceptual judgement, and therefore must rely on external validation. Cull (2019) emphasised that these speech acts extend beyond the immediate impact on the victim's self-perception, as they often serve a broader social function. Cull described a tactic often used within gaslighting known as 'dismissive incomprehension', in which the perpetrator will suggest that the statements of the victim are ignorant, and not worth consideration. This act is usually done with three effects in mind, to reduce the victim's credibility in the eyes of an audience, to silence the victim, and to pathologise the victim and the argument they represent (Cull, 2019). The significance of these philosophical analyses is in their ability to emphasise that, intentionally or not, these speech acts convey a message to the victim, and a broader audience, about the victim's right to participate in the negotiation of shared reality.

Epistemic injustice is a term that has been increasingly used within the philosophy and psychology gaslighting literature to understand the function and impact of gaslighting acts. Fricker (2007) conceptualised epistemic injustice, in its most general form as "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (p.1). Fricker was interested in drawing attention to the injustice that may exist in the way we convey knowledge to others, and the way it may impact upon how others make sense of their reality. When reflecting upon the social functions that gaslighting speech acts perform (i.e., denying an individual's capacity to participate in knowledge creation), it is understandable how epistemic injustice has become a frequently utilised concept for understanding the social and moral wrongs that gaslighting creates. Most frequently, however, gaslighting has been used in relation to a specific form of epistemic injustice called 'testimonial injustice'. Fricker (2007) conceptualised testimonial injustice as occurring when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (p.1). That is, prejudice towards the social group of that speaker causes their testimony to be taken less seriously. Although, within the limited research on gaslighting, philosophers have had differing opinions on the extent to which gaslighting and testimonial

injustice are related, as some have discussed testimonial injustice as a related term to gaslighting (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Sodoma, 2022) while others have described gaslighting as a specific type of testimonial injustice (McKinnon, 2017).

A point of tension within this debate is the extent to which gaslighting is seen as a reflection of prejudice towards an individual's identity or group membership. McKinnon (2019) argued that the relationship between gaslighting and testimonial injustice was less direct than identity prejudice against the victim. McKinnon (2019) argued that the credibility deficit in victims was created indirectly, through perpetrators putting too much credence on their own perception, especially when confronted with information that goes against their background beliefs. Sodoma (2022) noted that philosophical approaches to gaslighting can often blur boundaries between gaslighting and other injustices. Sodoma argued that gaslighting and testimonial injustice had a key difference, in that gaslighting is often done intentionally, and independently, of any genuine evaluation of the victim's cognitive capacity. Testimonial injustice, on the other hand, is based on a faulty assessment of another person's abilities, driven by bias against that individual's social group. Although, it would be possible to imagine a situation in which a perpetrator is less aware of the motivations behind their behaviour, at which point the delineation between these two concepts would blur. Further, McKinnon (2019) notes that less visible structural patterns that cause credibility deficits could play a large role in a perpetrator's credibility evaluation of a victim, such as the impact of gender and race. Stark (2019) distinguished between what she labelled 'epistemic gaslighting', which is more reflective of testimonial injustice (i.e., unintentional, targets specific social groups, requires social power over another), and 'manipulative gaslighting' (i.e., intentional, can be used on anyone, uses leverage to convince another). This distinction between intentional manipulative acts of gaslighting, and epistemic discrediting of groups of people has caused further confusion and debate in the field.

Stark's (2019) conception of manipulative gaslighting is more in line with Abramson's (2014) review of gaslighting, gender, and the leverage that is used against women to enable the tactics' efficacy. Both philosophical perspectives place manipulation and control at the centre of the social interaction between the victim and perpetrator, where threat and leverage are used to force an individual to concede their perspective. Spear (2020), however, argued that while manipulation may be involved in gaslighting, it is important not to underestimate the role of epistemic factors. The goal of gaslighting, through Spear's conception, is to destroy the victim's credibility and capacity to issue challenges to the perpetrator. It is not enough to convince an audience that the victim is uncredible, or silence the victim through threats, for it to be considered gaslighting. The victim must come to discredit their own epistemic abilities. Spear (2020) argued that in order to achieve this goal, the victim must be given a primarily epistemic reason to lose trust in their judgment. This can be enacted, at least in part, through leveraging the victim's trust in their partner as an epistemic peer. Epistemic factors such as trust, and relative authority may cause someone to put more credence in their partner's challenges. When perpetrators introduce false or misleading information, this may create an epistemic dilemma where the victim is forced to choose between their beliefs and those of their trusted partner.

Particularly in the context of intimate relationships, there are elements of emotional investment which may motivate victims to entertain these epistemic challenges. The control, threat, and leverage identified by Abramson (2014) and Stark (2019) may then exacerbate this epistemic dilemma as the manipulative pressure may prevent victims from properly assessing the credibility and misleading evidence put towards them by their partner (Spear, 2023). This can be particularly pertinent when the gaslighting targets less tangible domains, such as an individual's emotional reactions, e.g., 'you're overreacting' (Sodoma, 2022). An important contribution of these philosophical investigations into gaslighting is that they draw attention to the way in which gaslighting coopts and coerces, through relying upon and disrupting social

norms. As it is impossible for individuals to see the world as it is, without the bias of interpretation, we often disagree with one another and are put in positions where we must negotiate and co-create a shared reality (Williams, 2021). In fact, many philosophical and social psychology concepts rely upon this fact that humans can exploit unspoken social expectations to achieve outcomes (e.g., relational schemas, Baldwin, 1992; politeness theory, Locher & Watts, 2005). Roberts and Andrews (2013) argued for the importance that shared narratives play in identity formation. Through repetition and exposure to consistent narratives, they quickly become a reified and shared reality. It is important to acknowledge the coercive power that gaslighting has beyond its ability to leverage and threaten consequences, or an individual's vulnerability towards self-distrust. Gaslighting may breach social contracts and expectations and coerce partners into positions where they need to re-evaluate their concept of reality or concede.

Tactics of Gaslighting and their Coercive Impact

While disciplines have approached gaslighting with differing focus and framing, one thing that has remained relatively constant across the literature are descriptions and theories of individual level tactics that are applied within gaslighting. A comprehensive model of gaslighting behaviours has not yet been established, although current efforts are underway to address this gap in the literature and have been pre-registered on Open Science Framework (Darke et al., 2023). In the meantime, it is possible to discern broad categories of behaviours theorised throughout the current literature. Such broad categories include attempts to manipulate reality, denial/dismissiveness, behavioural inconsistency, isolation, inclusion of others in the manipulation, and utilising other abusive behaviours in combination with the gaslighting specific behaviours.

Manipulation of Reality

The first, and most paradigmatic gaslighting behaviour is an attempt to manipulate reality through verbal and physical actions. This has been identified consistently across the literature through specific tactics such as lying (Gass & Nichols, 1988), questioning perceptions, thoughts, reactions, or memories (Bhatti et al., 2021) or manipulating the environment to contribute to a sense of confusion and unreality (Hailes, 2022). All these behaviours achieve the broader goal of causing an individual to feel ‘crazy’ and unable to rely upon their own thoughts and feelings (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015).

Denial

A related behaviour is denial, which achieves a similar goal of driving a wedge between a victim and their autonomy to make judgements about reality. Denial tactics could include refusing to acknowledge facts even when presented with evidence (Sarkis, 2018), or dismissive proclamations in place of discussion, such as ‘that’s crazy’ (Abramson, 2014). This also includes minimising tactics (e.g., ‘you’re overreacting’) or remaining deliberately vague (Simon, 2010).

The tactics of lying, denying, dismissing, and minimising are frequently described as used in the service of avoiding accountability or shifting the responsibility of the perpetrator’s actions onto the victim, i.e., ‘there is nothing wrong with my behaviour, your reaction is out of proportion’ (Klein, Li, and Wood, 2023; Williams, 2021). The arguments of responsibility, combined with the repetition of lying and denying behaviours, contribute to a sense of confusion and uncertainty (Ahern, 2018).

Inconsistency of Behaviour

Hayes and Jeffries (2015) reflected upon their experiences of psychological abuse and noted that gaslighting exists on a spectrum from outrageous lies and obvious manipulation to more subtle lies interspersed with moments of truth. This inconsistency can exist across

couples, or within the same couple. As Sarkis (2018) noted, the goal of gaslighting is to keep the target off kilter and unsure of what to expect. This inconsistency of lies and truth, or love and abuse contribute to the broader state of confusion that gaslighting ultimately creates. Moreover, gaslighting frequently occurs in conjunction with other forms of physical and verbal abuse, contributing to an overarching sense of distorted reality. This has been described as including coercive behaviour such as verbal and emotional abuse (Klein, Li, & Wood, 2023), leveraging practical consequences (Abramson, 2014), physical threat and violence (Sarkis, 2018), sexual abuse (Hailes, 2022) and institutional abuse (Sweet, 2019). While the line between gaslighting and other forms of abuse can at times be murky, it is well documented that gaslighting often exists in concert with, and relies upon, other forms of abuse to remain impactful.

Isolation

The original case studies of gaslighting involved external forms of isolation in which family members were institutionalised, removed from friends and family. This concept of isolation has followed through to modern conceptions of gaslighting, through a range of direct and indirect avenues. Isolation may involve the perpetrator coercing the victim into spending less time with their friends and family in order to prevent them from receiving support or outside perspectives that may corroborate the victim's perspective (Klein, Li, & Wood, 2023; Sodoma, 2022; Hailes, 2022). It can also take form through other forms of coercive control, such as institutional abuse, in which institutions such as child protective services or police, are used to isolate victims from their support networks (Sweet, 2019). Isolation may not always be enacted through separating victims from their support networks, it has also been documented that isolation can be achieved through coopting and including support networks in supporting the perpetrator's gaslighting attempts (Hailes, 2022). Multiple individuals can be party to the gaslighting, knowingly or unknowingly, further isolating victims from outside perspectives that

may contradict the gaslighting narratives (Sodoma, 2022). Further, the impact of gaslighting can create cyclical responses in which individuals become exhausted and disengaged from social networks, further limiting exposure to counter-narratives and support (Stern, 2007).

Coercion

In the past few years, there has been increasing discussion around the connection between gaslighting and coercion. Gaslighting has been argued to often present itself as a regular conflict or disagreement between partners that needs to be resolved to restore peace and stability within the relationship (Stern, 2007). As discussed earlier, conflict may become gaslighting through the investments that both parties have in the relationship (Graves & Samp, 2021). As Abramson (2014) argued, gaslighting leverages the victim's love and empathy for their partner to manipulate them into engaging with the partner and to continue attempting to pursue mutual agreement. Stern (2007) considered the potential of gaslighting tactics to leverage individuals' values and expectations for coercive purposes. Stern described the progression of gaslighting as 'insidious', in which both parties may not be fully conscious of the abusive nature of their relationship. The abuse may target the victim's deepest fears, or weaponise the victim's innate desire to be loved and understood by their partner. Stern argued that, provided the victim still desires approval or understanding from their abuser, they will remain vulnerable to the gaslighting. Given that gaslighting is frequently a subtle and insidious process, whereby perpetrators may manipulate the conflict to appear as if they care for their partner, or oscillate between abusive behaviour and affection, it is unsurprising that victims continue to pursue mutual understanding with their partner, when the gaslighting is presented as resolvable conflicts. The desire to resolve this conflict is made more pertinent through the co-occurrence of other abusive behaviours that may trap people within these relationships, such as leveraging economic dependency or evoking the resources and time that have already been invested into the relationship (Abramson, 2014).

Resulting Self-Doubt

The creation of self-doubt may play a large role in the ongoing impact of gaslighting. As gaslighting may target a wide range of domains (i.e., emotions, memories, thoughts, perceptions; Hailes, 2022; Klein, Li, Wood, 2023), it may become increasingly difficult to check in with oneself for validation (Sodoma, 2022). The cognitive dissonance that exists between the victim's experiences and what they are told, in combination with coercion and the victim's desire to resolve this dissonance, has been argued to lead to confusion and self-doubt (Hailes, 2022; Ahern, 2018). Stern (2007) noted that the experience of self-doubt can vary across victims, with some only experiencing self-doubt in one domain and others in multiple. Hailes (2022) corroborated this in interviews with gaslighting victim-survivors, as the experience of self-doubt varied greatly between individuals and even within individuals. Abramson (2014) conceptualised the most severe outcome of gaslighting to be the destruction of self, where the victim's identity has been erased and therefore provides no basis of which to build self-trust and self-esteem. Hailes (2022) did note variability in victim-survivor self-esteem after the relationship. Some victim-survivors did report long-term impacts on self-trust, however she noted that many of the interviewees were able to rebuild identity and self-trust long-term after separating from their abuser (Hailes, 2022). It is not possible, however, due to the lack of prevalence and large-scale studies into gaslighting, to fully conceive of the rate of recovery from gaslighting, or the key factors that may play a role in this variability.

Building a Model of Gaslighting

There have been three studies which have made early attempts to model gaslighting relationships, through surveying victim-survivors (Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022; Klein, Li, and Wood, 2023). The models that have come from victim-survivors have put strong emphasis on the ecology in which gaslighting takes place, and the tactics which rely upon or weaponise the ecology. The first of these models was created by Sweet (2019), who developed a situational

map of gaslighting, through interviews with domestic violence survivors and domestic violence professionals. Sweet created a map that emphasised the complex interaction between gender and intersectional inequalities, gaslighting tactics, and institutional vulnerabilities. The situational map painted an ecological view of the environment and enabling factors that deny women access to social support and institutional help, as well as weaponise women's fear of being perceived as unbelievable. Following from this, Hailes (2022) also interviewed domestic violence survivors and created a two-part model of gaslighting that emphasised the tactics used against the victim (i.e., questioning, and challenging) and the response from the victim (i.e., self-doubt). Hailes discussed further a range of ecological influences (e.g., personal history, education, social support, gender), that were described by the interviewees as key to their experience.

Klein, Li, and Wood (2023) have also attempted to model the process of gaslighting, and empirically test prior theories by surveying 65 victim-survivors online with a short answer questionnaire. Their results highlighted many unaddressed aspects of gaslighting (e.g., motivation for perpetrator, progression of gaslighting and relationship dynamics, long term recovery). However, there are a few methodological limitations which may impact the strength of the findings. The sample was small for an online written questionnaire covering such a broad and complex phenomenon as gaslighting, limiting its representativeness (see Braun et al., 2021). Further, despite the study being described as using grounded theory did not undertake an iterative process (i.e., questions were progressively formulated on participant feedback, with iterative movement between interviews and analysis until saturation was reached) which is required for an analysis to be categorised as a grounded theory (see Watling et al., 2017). Grounded theory may be a worthwhile endeavour for future research as the regular consultancy involved in this approach appropriately involves and grounds research in the victim-survivor experience (Foley et al., 2021).

Overall, the current models have focused on different elements of gaslighting using small samples, i.e., Sweet's sociological account (2019), Hailes (2022) two-part model, and Kelin, Li, and Wood's (2023) focus on relationship dynamics and outcomes. Future models of gaslighting would benefit from establishing the aspects of these prior models across victim-survivors from a wider variety of backgrounds. Through establishing research that is grounded in the victim-survivor experience, it is possible to contribute more meaningfully towards academic, policy, and public awareness of gaslighting, and how to disrupt and break its cycle.

Conclusion

Until recently, gaslighting has remained an obscure term, applied inconsistently across the literature, such as being described as a form of family abuse for personal or material gain (e.g., Barton & Whitehead, 1969), a dysfunctional interpersonal script or intimate partner dynamic (e.g., Stern, 2007; Graves & Samp, 2021), and an expression of structural power and silencing of specific groups (e.g., Sweet, 2019; Berenstain, 2020). The evolution of literature from individual difference theories to acknowledgement of the role of structural factors and power on gaslighting provides impetus to think more clearly about the mechanisms and driving forces of this phenomenon, particularly as a form of control and intimate partner violence (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Bhatti et al., 2021). While it is encouraging to see the dramatic increase in gaslighting research across the past few years, it is important that understanding of gaslighting is driven by, and grounded in the experiences and needs of those impacted by it. The first way that this can be achieved is through intentional and consistent labelling of gaslighting behaviours. Burnett (2020), in a review of women's experiences of covert abusive tactics, argued that the ability to leave an abusive relationship often relies upon being able to label the abuse. Further, as gaslighting has been argued to often centre around shifting blame onto victim-survivors (Ahern, 2018), labelling abuse can have an important role in clarifying and reducing the self-blame that victim-survivors often experience (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013). It is

apparent that the term ‘gaslighting’ has helped many people find meaning and understanding in their experiences, as it has had a large grassroots movement in domestic violence support groups (e.g., Kippert, 2021). Therefore, it is important for research to remain up to date with the concerns and focus of victim-survivors, advocates, and professionals who deal with gaslighting first-hand.

An important first step that gaslighting research must take is to establish a clear definition that tackles some of the inconsistencies that commonly emerge across research and accounts of gaslighting. For instance, the current research is inconsistent as to how conscious or intentional these manipulative behaviours must be before they are considered gaslighting. Issues around intentionality have significant implications for the ways gaslighting might be interpreted in the context of existing laws relating to coercive control or psychological abuse (Shkara, 2024; Follingstad, 2007). This also applies to inconsistencies in the types of behaviours that are considered gaslighting (e.g., lying to hospital staff, Barton & Whitehead; 1969; expressing public dismissal of someone’s opinions, Cull, 2019), or whether gaslighting can occur once, or must be a repeated behaviour (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Graves & Samp, 2021), and importantly, whether a survivor must experience specific outcomes for gaslighting to have occurred (e.g., Hailes, 2022). With the contradictory state of the current literature, it is not possible to firmly state the extent to which these factors are essential to the definition of gaslighting, particularly as there is so little empirical research in the area. There are some works underway currently which will begin to empirically and theoretically challenge these factors, and establish clearer functional definitions of gaslighting (e.g., Darke et al., 2023). Establishing clear and consistent definitions of gaslighting and identifying common experiences and enabling factors across broader demographics will go a long way in providing meaningful education and procedures in identifying and understanding this form of abuse.

One of the particularly contentious differences in the gaslighting literature is the focus within psychology upon personality or individual differences. While psychology can play an important role in establishing evidence-based research into gaslighting, foundational questions of the field need to be established prior to efforts to answer nuanced questions. For instance, prior to drawing inferences concerning how individual differences underpin vulnerability towards gaslighting, we need to establish a reliable and theoretically sound measure of gaslighting itself.

Psychological research must be undertaken cautiously and responsibly to avoid inferences based on faulty assumptions of why gaslighting impacts individuals differently. Future gaslighting measures should be based on the existing gaslighting literature across disciplines, and they need to be transparent regarding the assumptions underpinning scale development. This is particularly important as the conclusions that are drawn from these studies may easily lay blame on the ‘dysfunction’ of the victim-survivor as an individual (e.g., Miano et al., 2021). While psychology studies have had a disproportionate focus on victim-survivor traits, this is not reflective of the key contributing factors identified by victim-survivors in interview and survey studies (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019; Klein, Li, and Wood, 2023). Victim-survivors continue to identify boarder structures of power, leverage, and social norms/expectations as key to vulnerability to gaslighting tactics. Through continuing to focus on individual traits, research and practice run the risk of overlooking the important role of power and social norms in enabling this abuse. Moving forward, it is crucial for psychology research to consider what the practical benefits are of researching individual differences while more basic questions surrounding concept clarification remain to be answered.

Moving forward, there is a need to prioritise empirical studies grounded in the experiences of victim-survivors, while understanding gaslighting through its function and outcome. This will not only enhance potential supports for victim-survivors, but also offer

insight to policy and practice changes in addressing psychological abuse. Guerin and de Oliverira (2017) advocated for understanding abuse through its function, as they argue that this approach creates more practical support for victim-survivors. That is, identifying the tactics, purpose, and outcomes of abuse is more likely to assist people in recognising the variety of ways in which abuse may be enacted. Since the writing of this review, it is promising to see future research has been pre-registered in this important area (e.g., Klein, Wood, and Bartz, 2024). Improved research into gaslighting behaviours, function, and outcomes will have significant implications for practitioners and policy makers. For instance, it has the potential to improve recognition and identification of this often-invisible form of abuse in clients, inform tailored interventions that target the mechanisms and outcomes of gaslighting, assist in integrating gaslighting as a form of psychological abuse into existing legal frameworks, and inform public awareness campaigns. Researching gaslighting as a coercive tactic that is intertwined with broader structures of power may also offer more practical avenues for policy and practice changes, as it can elucidate forms of disadvantage that enable this abuse and must be addressed if future interventions are to be effective.

Chapter 2: Defining Gaslighting

Preface

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Abstract

With growing attention on criminalising psychological forms of abuse, it is imperative that researchers develop clear and intentional definitions of abstract concepts, like gaslighting. The purpose of this paper was to develop a definition of gaslighting by comparing key points of contention in existing literature with the first-hand experiences of victim-survivors and support service providers, in order to enhance future research and assist practitioners who apply existing related policies and legal frameworks. The study used an online open-ended survey to gather data from victim-survivors and support service providers about their definitions of gaslighting. Responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify definitional components of gaslighting. The study identified six key components of gaslighting: behaviour, outcomes, intention, repetition, subsidiary tactics, and the role of power and intimacy. The study proposed a definition of gaslighting informed by victim-survivor and service provider perspectives, while acknowledging the need for further research to refine controversial components like intention, repetition, and power imbalances. Further, it addresses limitations such as the lack of perpetrator perspectives and the need for more diverse samples in the refinement of future definitions and measurements of gaslighting.

Introduction

For decades, research on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) focused predominately on physical and sexual violence, often emphasising isolated incidents of abuse or explicit threats (Straus, 1979). However, IPV is now increasingly recognised as a multifaceted issue involving patterns of harmful behaviours such as emotional abuse, isolation, and coercion. Although feminist scholars have long argued that IPV consists of sustained patterns of dominance and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979), legal systems worldwide have only recently begun to reflect this understanding. Johnson (2008) argued that part of the reason it has taken so long for this change in research and practice is that IPV has historically been viewed as a monolithic phenomenon, whereas there are actually distinct forms of IPV with identifiable goals, patterns, and outcomes.

Johnson (2008) coined the term ‘intimate terrorism’ to describe a form of IPV characterised by pervasive controlling behaviour, primarily perpetrated by men, aimed at eroding a victim-survivor’s autonomy. Coercive control, a construct related to intimate terrorism, involves patterns of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner, and it is increasingly recognised in legal systems worldwide (EIGE, 2021). Victim-survivor accounts emphasise that psychological forms of abuse, central to intimate terrorism and coercive control, are often the most damaging with the longest-lasting impacts (Dye, 2020; Follingstad et al., 1990; Walker, 1979). Subsequent studies have further demonstrated that patterns of control and psychological abuse lead to more severe and enduring consequences than isolated acts of IPV (Anderson, 2008; Leone et al., 2004; Lohmann et al., 2023; Myhill & Hole, 2019).

Psychological abuse has long been recognised as a central tactic in both intimate terrorism and coercive control (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015; Johnson, 2008). For example, the Duluth Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), a community-developed model of IPV, highlights emotionally and psychologically abusive behaviours such as minimising, denying,

blaming, and calling someone ‘crazy’ as critical tactics for maintaining power over victim-survivors. Researchers have consistently called for greater recognition of non-physical forms of abuse, arguing that interventions focused solely on physical violence are ill-equipped to address the unique harms of psychological and coercive patterns of abuse (Stark, 2007). Johnson (2008) contended that, without clear recognition of different patterns of abuse, particularly those characterised by coercive control, policy and legal responses risk being ineffective but may endanger victim-survivors. While Johnson’s work focused on relationship typologies, it reinforces broader calls for clearer conceptualisation of non-physical and coercive forms of abuse.

Understanding tactics of abuse within intimate terrorism and coercive control, is therefore essential for designing effective responses to these enduring and damaging forms of IPV. However, despite increased awareness of psychological and coercive forms of IPV in recent years, translating these complex dynamics into policy and law remains a deeply nuanced matter requiring careful consideration. One major challenge is defining forms of abuse and establishing the conditions required for an act to be considered abusive. This study introduces a discussion on defining a tactics of abuse commonly used within both coercive control and intimate terrorism, popularly referred to as “gaslighting”.

The term "gaslighting" originates from an early 20th-century play in which a husband manipulates his wife into doubting her sanity (Hamilton, 1939). While the concept has gained significant traction in recent years, it is often broadly applied in popular discourse to scenarios ranging from simple disagreements to severe psychological abuse (e.g., DiGiulio, 2018; Kippert, 2021). In fact, gaslighting was recently identified as one of the most misused psychological terms in a publication by the American Psychological Society (Medaris, 2024). Within IPV research, gaslighting is frequently cited as a tactic of intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008; Hayes & Jeffries, 2015) and as a mechanism of coercive control (March et al., 2023).

Related behaviours have also appeared in earlier frameworks such as the Duluth Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), though Duluth centres physical and sexual violence, whereas coercive control models (e.g., Stark, 2007) highlight that tactics like gaslighting can occur even in the absence of physical abuse. However, despite its recognition as a form of psychological abuse, research explicitly focused on gaslighting remains limited. Often conflated with broader aspects of intimate terrorism or coercive control, gaslighting has yet to be comprehensively studied as a distinct tactic.

Within IPV research, gaslighting is frequently cited as a tactic of intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008; Hayes & Jeffries, 2015) and as a mechanism of coercive control (March et al., 2023). Although sometimes referenced in earlier frameworks such as the Duluth Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), the Duluth model conceptualised abuse differently, positioning physical and sexual violence as central, whereas coercive control models (e.g., Stark, 2007) emphasise that behaviours like gaslighting can operate independently of physical violence.

The limited attention given to gaslighting as a distinct form of abuse means little is known about its prevalence or unique impacts compared to other forms of IPV. However, A 2014 U.S. phone survey revealed that over 85% of IPV survivor respondents reported experiencing gaslighting tactics, such as being labelled “crazy” by their partners (Warshaw et al., 2014). Given that many of the documented outcomes of intimate terrorism and coercive control, such as undermining autonomy and creating a sense of “surreality” (Johnson, 2008), align closely with the aims of gaslighting, the lack of focused research on its role and impact is surprising. This gap is particularly concerning, as recent interview studies have shown that survivors often describe gaslighting as one of the most harmful and enduring forms of abuse, with effects persisting long after the relationship ends (Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022; Bhatti et al., 2021). Researching gaslighting presents challenges, as it often co-occurs with other forms of

IPV, and its complex overlapping nature with other coercive and psychologically abuse behaviours makes it difficult to define clear boundaries.

In fact, defining and operationalising ‘psychological abuse’ in general is an inherently difficult and elusive task. Various terms such as emotional abuse (e.g., Gavin, 2011; Loring, 1994), psychological violence (e.g., Greenfield & Marks, 2010), psychological aggression (e.g., Follingstad, 2007; Williams et al., 2012), and non-physical abuse (e.g., James & Mackinnon, 2010), have been used interchangeably with psychological abuse in research. Even within the term ‘psychological abuse’, numerous conceptual and methodological issues arise when attempting to establish clear boundaries. For instance, Follingstad (2007) identified significant issues such as determining when a behaviour shifts from socially acceptable to unacceptable, whether specific outcomes are necessary for a behaviour to be deemed abusive, if the same behaviour is perceived as more or less abusive depending on the individuals involved, and whether intention is required for psychological abuse to have taken place. Gaslighting, as a form of psychological abuse, is not immune to these challenges.

In research, gaslighting has been defined as, “a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds, paradigmatically so unfounded as to qualify as crazy” (Abramson, 2014, p. 2). It has also, however, been defined as, “When one person knowingly, intentionally, and consistently undermines the perceptions of another with the goals of making them appear “crazy” to others, feel like they are losing their mind, and genuinely doubt their own grasp on reality” (Berenstain, 2020, p. 1). Further, gaslighting has been defined simply as “A type of psychological manipulation that develops doubt in the targeted individual or a group by making them question their own rationality, memory and perception” (Bhatti et al., 2021, p. 1). These three definitions alone vary in whether they stipulate that gaslighting is intentional, whether certain outcomes

are required for a behaviour to constitute gaslighting, and in which domains it takes place (e.g., memory, perception, reactions). Given these inconsistencies, it is surprising and concerning that so few papers have taken a clear and intentional stance on how gaslighting should be operationalised, and even fewer have discussed the rationale behind their choice of definition.

Despite the existence of various definitions in previous studies, there is no universally accepted definition of gaslighting. The term has been adopted across multiple disciplines including philosophy (e.g., Sodoma, 2022; Spear, 2020), sociology (e.g., Rodrigues, Mendenhall, Clancy, 2021; Sweet 2019) and more recently, empirical psychology (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Klein et al., 2023; March et al., 2023; Miano et al., 2021) as well as across different forms of publication such as self-help literature (e.g., Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2007) and doctoral research (e.g., Hightower, 2017; Portnow, 1996). While these studies have made valuable contributions to the understanding of gaslighting, they often do not employ the same definitions and, indeed, there is little consensus on what should and should not be included in a definition of gaslighting.

Establishing a clear, victim-survivor informed definition of gaslighting is critical for several reasons. First, consistent labels and typologies of abuse that resonate with the general community are vital. Hayes and Jeffries (2013) found that identifying and naming specific forms of abuse, particularly covert and manipulative forms, can play a significant role in reducing self-blame and can increase the likelihood of support-seeking among IPV victim-survivors. Additionally, clear definitions that combat the ongoing definitional creep of gaslighting (Medaris, 2024), are essential to fostering broader community recognition of this form abuse, shaping attitudes about its severity, and influencing how it is perceived in legal contexts, such as by jurors.

Beyond the conceptual obscurity present in research and community misrepresentation, failing to clearly define gaslighting creates significant barriers to its practical application by

practitioners working within existing policy and legal frameworks. Courts are increasingly moving away from focus on isolated instances of abuse, adopting frameworks that address the cumulative harm caused by patterns of coercive, controlling, and psychologically abusive behaviours (Stark, 2012). Although criminal coercive control laws are emerging worldwide to address this shift in focus (EIGE, 2021, Department of Communities and Justice, 2024), different legal contexts vary in the extent to which they require proof of intention versus assessments of risk or patterns of behaviour. There is an increased likelihood that gaslighting will feature in legal or quasi-legal settings, yet definitional ambiguity creates challenges for consistent identification. Intent is a particularly contested issue, while some statutes (particularly criminal offences) require proof that behaviour was intentional, literature on gaslighting remains divided. Some scholars characterise gaslighting as an intentional manipulation (Roberts & Andrews, 2013), while others contend it can occur both ‘consciously or unconsciously’ (Dorpat, 1996). Further, proving intent in an act that is inherently designed to obscure intention poses significant challenges for practitioners.

Similarly, the concept of repetition is inconsistently addressed within the gaslighting literature, with some studies describing it as a persistent behaviour (Bates, 2020), akin to other aspects of intimate terrorism, while others suggest it can occur in ‘isolated instances’ (Graves & Samp, 2021). These differences have implications for how gaslighting might be interpreted in relation to traditional single-incident models of violence compared with broader frameworks addressing coercive control. There is also debate over whether specific outcomes are necessary for gaslighting to have occurred, and whether the severity of the impact should determine whether someone has been gaslit. For instance, Calef and Weinshel (1981) view gaslighting as purely an attempt to influence another, while Hailes (2022) argues that the outcome of self-doubt is necessary for an interaction to qualify as gaslighting. These discrepancies create significant challenges for how gaslighting may be conceptualised in policy and legal

discussions, as they affect which experiences might be considered under the broader term "gaslighting" and how they are understood in institutional contexts.

Given the multi-faceted and complex nature of gaslighting, as well as its relationship to intimate terrorism and coercive control, it is crucial to address these points of contention to improve our ability to identify and respond to gaslighting in both community and legal contexts. This study aims to develop a definition of gaslighting informed by the first-hand experiences and perspectives of victim-survivors and support service providers. By comparing key points of contention in the literature with the views of those most affected, this study seeks to contribute to a more productive discussion on how gaslighting can be effectively and consistently researched and operationalised in the future. As policy and legal frameworks, globally, are evolving to address a broader range of IPV forms, it is essential to identify definitional components for this complex and manipulative form of abuse. The aim is not to propose specific legal recommendations, but to create discussion about how gaslighting can be effectively addressed in policy and legislative decisions.

Transparency and Openness

This study was preregistered on AsPredicted and can be accessed at the following link <https://aspredicted.org/hjgf-2mcb.pdf>. As the participants of this study did not provide written consent to publicly share their raw responses, and due to the sensitive and potentially identifiable nature of this information, the supporting data is not openly available. An expanded method and research materials are available on Open Science Framework <https://osf.io/x3tuk>

This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2021/532) on August 20, 2021.

Method

Given the limited body of research that currently exists on gaslighting, it is more appropriate to use qualitative descriptive methods (e.g., descriptive phenomenology, content

analysis, thematic analysis), as these involve the least amount of interpretation, and adhere more closely to the exact words and descriptions used by the respondents (Doyle et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2000). Particularly given that gaslighting, as a phenomenon, is designed to invalidate and misrepresent the words and meanings of victim-survivors, it is especially important for this research to utilise description and direct quotes as much as possible, to represent the experiences of this population in their words (e.g., Hailes & Goodman, 2023).

The current study employed an online open-ended survey, allowing respondents to self-administer and express themselves using their own words. This method has been advocated for and employed in previous qualitative research as it captures perspectives from vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations, while minimising participant burden (e.g., Dickinson & Adams, 2014). This approach produces a ‘wide-angle’ view, capturing a broader range of sense-making, experiences, and perspectives across a population (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). This method is particularly beneficial for viewing patterns across responses, and investigating emerging, under-researched topics, such as gaslighting (Braun et al., 2021). Given the sensitive nature of gaslighting in the context of IPV, and the self-doubt often expressed by victim-survivors (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes & Goodman, 2023), the anonymity of an online format may encourage greater disclosure and participation from individuals less inclined to engage in face-to-face studies (Neville et al., 2016).

Participants and Recruitment

To participate in this study, respondents had to (1) identify as victim-survivors of gaslighting in IPV or have professional experience working with victim-survivors, (2) be over 18, and (3) speak fluent English. Advertisements were distributed through Australian domestic violence support organisations and at a domestic and family violence conference, with additional recruitment via closed Facebook groups and word-of-mouth using convenience and

snowball sampling. Of the 299 victim-survivors and 19 service providers who began the survey, the final sample included 248 victim-survivors and 17 service providers, after excluding incomplete or non-serious responses (e.g., one-word responses).

Table 2.1

Demographics of Victim-Survivor Participants Across Inductive and Deductive Groups

Sample Characteristics	Inductive				Deductive			
	n	%	M	SD	n	%	M	SD
Gender								
Women	78	97%			160	95%		
Men	2	3%			8	5%		
Age (years)			42	9.37			42	10.26
Residence								
Australia	80	100%			168	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	71	89%			134	80%		
Outside Australia	9	11%			34	20%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	73	91%			148	88%		
Outside Australia	7	9%			20	12%		

Note: more detailed breakdowns of demographics can be found in Appendix B.

According to Braun et al., (2021), the sample size required for qualitative online surveys depends on the research scope, topic, and response detail. Large exploratory topics like gaslighting require larger samples to capture diverse perspectives and experiences. During data collection, responses were monitored for thematic saturation. Saturation was assessed through two key dimensions: thickness and richness (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Johnson et al., 2020). Thickness referred to the diversity of perspectives, demonstrated by the number of responses

and the inclusion of insights from both victim-survivors and support service providers. Richness referred to the detail and depth of the responses.

Table 2.2

Demographics of Support Service Participants

Sample Characteristics	n	%	M	SD
Gender				
Women	17	100%		
Age (years)			48	8.99
Residence				
Australia	17	100%		
Birth Location				
Australia	11	65%		
Outside Australia	6	35%		
Longest Residing Location				
Australia	15	88%		
Outside Australia	2	12%		
Job Experience (years)			13.7 (2 – 30)	9.10
Job Titles				
Specialist counsellor	11	65%		
Psychologist	2	12%		
Case Worker	1	6%		
Family Support Worker	1	6%		
Social Wellbeing Worker	1	6%		
Social Worker	1	6%		

Data collection ceased once a broad range of perspectives had been captured, detailed insights had been provided, and themes began to repeat without the emergence of new

concepts. A final sample size of 265 (victim-survivors and service providers) was deemed substantial and appropriate to address the research questions (Braun et al., 2021).

The victim-survivor participant sample was divided into two groups, as described in the analysis procedure below, with one group used for inductive and the other for deductive coding. The demographics of both these groups can be seen in Table 2.1. The support service provider participants demographics and work experience can be seen in Table 2.2.

Procedure

Survey responses were collected via the Qualtrics platform. Participants accessed the survey through an advertised link and answered a triage question to identify as either a victim-survivor or service provider, followed by demographic questions. While some participants may have identified as both victim-survivors and support service providers, those opting to participate as service providers were requested to answer questions based on their professional experience, offering a distinct perspective. After completing these, respondents were presented with nine open-ended questions about gaslighting (see full survey in Appendix A). This paper reports results collected as part of a larger survey exploring perspectives and experiences of gaslighting. Here we focused specifically on the first aim of the survey: investigating the criteria under which individuals classify a behaviour as gaslighting. Accordingly, this paper examines responses to the first question, 'How would you define gaslighting?', while the remaining questions are reported in a separate manuscript with distinct aims. The length of responses to the definition question varied across participants ranging from 19 to 200 words. For each participant, a \$5 donation was made to Women's Community Shelters as reimbursement.

Data Analysis

This study employs qualitative content analysis as outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), supplemented by iterative categorisation as outlined by Neale (2016). Qualitative content

analysis is suitable as it is descriptive, inductive, and allows for the development of categories and sub-categories to represent the definitional components of gaslighting (e.g., Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Further, to strengthen the findings of the content analysis, there were three points of triangulation i.e., the inductive group, deductive group, and the service providers. Using Morgan's (2019) typology of triangulation, the three points of comparison in this study enhance the credibility of findings by examining the convergence of results from three independent respondent groups. Additionally, comparing the perspectives of victim-survivors and support service providers adopts a complementarity approach, as their insights both complement each other and offer distinct angles for understanding the same phenomenon.

The analysis process was conducted in four stages. First, data were prepared and familiarised by organising the responses by length in a separate document. Next, was the inductive stage; data were open coded, which involved inductively generating codes from the data. This process was completed with three coders independently, checking in with each other every 10-15 responses.

Codes were progressively refined and grouped into broader categories and sub-categories. After 80 responses, all coders agreed that the codes were clear, mutually exclusive, and no new codes were emerging, therefore saturation was reached. Next, the finalised codes were deductively applied to the remaining 168 responses to validate the categories on a second group of respondents. This process involved checking that the codes were clear and accurately accounted for definitional components raised by the second group. Finally, this deductive process was repeated with the service provider responses. The refined categories and sub-categories are reported in the results below. The categories will be discussed using qualitative descriptors such as 'some' or 'common.' These terms are intended to describe patterns in the data rather than serve as quantitative measures. This study does not aim to report the

distribution of definitional codes across victim-survivors, the coding process focused on identifying and describing the definitional categories evident within participant accounts.

The coding team comprised the lead researcher and two undergraduate psychology students. Following an iterative training process (Neale, 2016), the coders independently examined the data for emerging concepts, then collaboratively discussed their findings to reach consensus. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the primary objective was to foster shared understanding and generate richer insights rather than ensuring replicability across coders (Armstrong et al., 1997; Smith & McGannon, 2018). While coders generally agreed on the codes, there were occasional instances of divergence, particularly regarding the clustering of sub-categories or the assignment of sub-categories to specific categories. These disagreements were not frequent and were resolved through discussion. Coding decisions were finalized only after all three coders reached agreement.

Trustworthiness

We aimed to ensure trustworthiness in this research through various strategies, guided by the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, outlined by Forero et al., (2018) and Stenfors et al. (2020). To enhance credibility and transferability, we triangulated responses across both victim-survivors and support service providers to capture a broad range of perspectives and we included counterpoints where applicable (Forero et al., 2018). We also maintained accountability during the analysis by training coders to derive codes directly from the data and holding regular check-ins to ensure agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussions, improving both rigor and credibility. Dependability was ensured through a detailed and transparent account of the data collection and analysis process, allowing other researchers to replicate the methodology (Stenfors et al., 2020). To maintain confirmability, we ensured a close connection between the data and the findings, using direct quotes and examples to support our conclusions (Stenfors et al., 2020). Reflectivity and

accountability were practiced throughout, supplemented by ongoing documentation of our thoughts, assumptions, discussions, and decisions (Forero et al., 2018). We also acknowledge that our feminist beliefs and advocacy for victim-survivors influenced our decision to focus on their experiences. While we endeavoured to stay close to the description and language choices of the respondents and avoid over-interpretation, we acknowledge that the choice to define gaslighting through their perspective is driven by a victim-survivor focused approach. This is further addressed in the limitations section.

Finally, this thesis is situated within psychology and aims to conceptualise gaslighting as a tactic of psychological abuse. References to law throughout this chapter are not intended as critiques of legal frameworks or recommendations for law reform. Instead, legal examples are used illustratively to highlight how definitional ambiguity around gaslighting may affect recognition, reporting, and responses by practitioners operating within existing legal structures. It is also important to acknowledge that legal standards vary across contexts. For instance, criminal offences may require proof of intent, whereas protection orders and family law often rely on risk or probability standards. The legal discussion therefore serves only to contextualise potential implications of the definition developed in this thesis.

Results

Terminology

As gaslighting is a complex social phenomenon, current literature has not fallen firmly on one set of labels for those involved. Authors have referred to individuals experiencing gaslighting as victims, gaslightee's, targets, and survivors (e.g., Graves & Samp, 2021; Klein et al., 2023; March et al., 2023; Sweet, 2019). Individuals using gaslighting have been referred to as perpetrators, abusers, gaslighters, or harming partners (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Li & Samp, 2023). The respondents in this study come from a wide range of circumstances, with many continuing to experiencing abuse or long-term impacts of

gaslighting. However, a consistent factor across respondents is that they had been targeted and victimised by perpetrators of gaslighting. It is for this reason, and for conceptual clarity, that when referring to the concept of gaslighting we will be using the terms ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’. However, when discussing the individuals who contributed to this study, we will use the term ‘respondent’ or ‘victim-survivor’ to acknowledge both the ongoing harm and impact of abuse that many are still experiencing, as well as the strength and resilience of these individuals (AIFS, 2024).

Victim-Survivor Informed Gaslighting Definition Categories

Victim-survivor respondents identified key components of gaslighting, including (a) a perpetrator challenging the victim’s perception of reality, (b) the victim doubting their perception of reality, (c) frequency and intensity of gaslighting attempts, (d) use of other forms of abuse to facilitate gaslighting, (e) isolation from support, (f) varied modes of gaslighting, (g) intentionality, and (h) the perpetrator-victim relationship.

Perpetrator Challenging Victim’s Perception of Reality (Recollection, Perception, Feelings, and Reactions)

The most characteristic aspect of gaslighting, as defined by the respondents, is a perpetrator challenging the victim’s perception of reality. The content of these challenges varies, targeting memory *‘I don’t remember it that way’*, perceptions *‘It’s not a big deal’*, or emotions *‘other wives don’t get upset about this stuff’ (P127)*. These challenges centered around convincing the victim to disregard their own perceptions and adopt the perpetrator’s narrative. Respondents identified three common tactics for doing this: deception, reversing blame, and narrative instability.

Deception

Deception involves perpetrators denying or fabricating information to invalidate the victim’s perceptions and reinforce their own narrative. Denial can include refusing to

acknowledge events, behaviours, or their impact, such as, “*saying or agreeing to one thing then denying the very conversation*” (P46). This denial was described as persisting even in the face of evidence, often explained away through loopholes or deflection. Fabrication can include creating information, such as being told “*your medication is messing with your brain, because you keep forgetting things or losing things. But you never knew or had these lost things to begin with*” (P187). Repeated deception left respondents confused and unable to trust their own senses, as one respondent describes, “*after constant communication of this nature you begin questioning your sanity, double guessing whether you imagined it*” (P190).

Reversing Blame

A common trend in perpetrators’ challenges was reversing blame, primarily to avoid accountability for their behaviour. Respondents often described gaslighting as making the victim feel responsible for conflict or tension in the relationship, often by projecting their own actions or attitudes onto the victims, “*twisting the truth until you are made to believe something is your fault*” (P69). Many respondents reported apologising for conflicts, regardless of their actual role. Perpetrators also used counteraccusations to incriminate the victim, as one respondent explained, “*When unable to deny, the gaslighter will change subject very quickly and accuse wronged person of something entirely differently to knock them off balance*” (P64). This strategy shifted the focus and responsibility onto the victim, by accusing them of either the perpetrators actions or unrelated issues.

Narrative Instability

Perpetrators were often described as changing narratives to suit their current agenda or obscure their intentions. While there is variation in the stories or characters that perpetrators used, a few common typologies emerged including playing the victim, the caring partner role, or the saviour. In the victim role, perpetrators alternated between abusive behaviour and claiming victimhood when confronted, such as “*hurting me and denying it happened then*

playing the victim, twisting the story to fit them” (P64). In the caring partner role, they were described as framing controlling actions as acts of love, such as installing security cameras under the guise of home security (i.e., P189). Alternatively, perpetrators may present themselves as the hero who needs to “*save the victim from themselves*” (P175). While the fluctuation of these narratives created confusion for many, there were respondents who experienced stable, manipulative personas that only became clear after the relationship ended, such as “[Victims are] *tricked into believing person is caring when in fact is controlling manipulating slowly acquiring complete control of the survivor*” (P197).

Victim Doubts Their Perception of Reality (Recollection, Perception, Feelings, and Reactions)

The impact of gaslighting on a victim’s perception of reality (i.e., recollections, perceptions, feelings, and reactions) was a key component across the respondents. As one noted, “*Gaslighting is not to merely disagree with a person’s opinions. A person can vigorously and passionately disagree even on issues of experience and emotion without it being gaslighting. Gaslighting is an effort to make the victim doubt themselves so that they will be more vulnerable and so that the gaslighter can take advantage of their loss of confidence*” (P60). Respondents described the effects of these continual challenges as leading to a range of outcomes that exist on a spectrum from confusion to self-doubt, and at its extreme, loss of identity.

Confusion/Disorientation

Confusion was a common response from the respondents to gaslighting. Many described struggling to reconcile their partners inconsistent words or behaviour with their own reality, making it more difficult to recognise the abuse. One respondent explained feeling “*rolled around into confusion so you don’t even understand what is happening*” (P134). Some noted that this confusion provoked reactions that were weaponised against them, with one

stating that gaslighting was “*solely enacted to create confusion and stress in the victim to either create an explosion from the victim or to gradually wear them down*” (P162). The ongoing confusion often contributed to more severe outcomes, “*you live in constant confusion, fearful that you’re going mad, can’t be trusted, forgetting things, a complete failure*” (P187).

Self-Doubt

Self-doubt was a common trend in respondents’ descriptions of gaslighting. It resulted directly from perpetrators actively telling victims to distrust their own senses, and indirectly through repeated challenges and invalidation of victims’ experiences. Perpetrators would question the victims’ ability to perceive reality, saying things like ‘you have a bad memory’, ‘you should be medicated’, or ‘you’re crazy’. In these instances, respondents described feeling encouraged to disregard their reality in favour of the perpetrators’, which led to “*slowly having your self-confidence eroded over time so that you doubt yourself and believe the gaslighter*” (P67). Constant lying, questioning, and manipulation also made it difficult for respondents to rely upon their own mind for reality testing, with many resorting to physical measures to keep track of reality e.g., “*writing notes all the time to check you’re not going crazy*” (P105).

Breakdown of Identity and Sense of Self

The inability to trust one’s perception not only created self-doubt but, in extreme cases, hindered the victim’s ability to act independently which led to a loss sense of self or identity. One respondent described gaslighting as the “*break down of an individual and their reality to the point the individual's personality becomes 'erased', they doubt their own sanity and they cease to have agency over their own life*” (P102). This extreme outcome results in complete dependence upon the perpetrator’s dictation of reality, and loss of reliance upon one’s own internal judgements, “*you doubt your own memories to the point that you sometimes erase them. You lose self-identity*” (P101).

Frequency and Intensity of Gaslighting Attempts

The repetition of gaslighting attempts was a key element in the definition and experience of gaslighting, as described by the respondents. They often described it as a pattern of behaviour, varying in both the frequency and intensity of the challenges.

Frequency of Challenges

The repetition of gaslighting remained a recurrent theme in definitions of gaslighting, often described as “*someone repeatedly denying your reality, so you start to believe them*” (P184). Gaslighting was described as a gradual process, with the frequency of challenges increasing over time “*it was a gradual sustained attack - that started very slowly, and then progressed with greater regularity, persistence and severity*” (P195). It was noted that initially, this may start with occasional comments such as ‘you’re just being crazy’, however it soon became a regular part of interactions with their partner. While the repetitive nature of gaslighting was a strong theme, some noted variations in the consistency of these challenges. Many described gaslighting as a constant act, such as “*It was the constant and sustained act of difference in recollection. He so convincing and adamant that he was right, questioning my recollection, mixing truth with fiction, and questioning, ‘can't you remember...’ etc.*” (P195). This constancy was described as significantly contributing to the loss of self-trust, as perpetrators ‘incrementally invert’ their reality (P192). Although, some respondents found the frequency of the challenges might be context specific, such as only occurring in instances of high stress “[*gaslighting occurred*] in times of stress and vulnerability for the victim, i.e., in the lead up to a big deadline” (P122). While there is variation in the frequency and onset of gaslighting behaviours, respondents were clear that it is not a one-off event, but a pattern of behaviour.

Intensity of Challenges

There is variation in the intensity of gaslighting attempts, with respondents describing a mixture of subtle and bold gaslighting attempts both across and within relationships. Many noted a covert and subtle nature to the challenges, such as how one respondent described gaslighting as occurring when a *“person insinuates the other is not making sense, undermines them by subtly stating opposite, denying they ever said certain things”* (P79). These persistent yet subtle attempts slowly undermined the victim’s confidence, while maintaining plausible deniability. Conversely, some respondents recounted obvious and bold gaslighting attempts from the outset, such as *“It started out as what I thought were lies. I’m not stupid so I used to tell him to stop lying to me”* (P176). Whether subtle or more overt in nature, both these approaches were described as wearing the victim down over time.

Isolation from Support

A common tactic described was the isolation of the victim from support and external perspectives. This includes both removing the victim from their support networks, as well as involving those networks in the gaslighting. Isolation is described as limiting the victim’s opportunities to receive input and validation about their concerns regarding the gaslighting.

Isolation of the Victim

Respondents described how perpetrators would isolate them from their support networks, and external sources of validation. Perpetrators often tried to keep victims away from individuals who may offer support, or a different perspective on their experiences. Respondents described feeling *“segregated from all friends and family”* (P16) and *“from other people who would otherwise be a source of support and validation”* (P76). While this could involve coercive or physical methods to keep the victim isolated, it also involved efforts to make the victim feel as if they were alone, such as implying that they would not be believed if they

reached out, or would be a burden e.g., “[they would say] *nobody cares about you or believes you*” (P58).

Involvement of Other Parties

Respondents also described a form of social isolation that involved the perpetrator integrating themselves into the victim’s social network and gaining trust and credibility among family and friends. For some respondents, this credibility was described as making the victim’s descriptions of abuse less believable (P67). Additionally, it can provide an avenue for the perpetrator to involve others in the gaslighting, by ‘*spreading lies*’, ‘*telling them that you’re crazy*’, or *expressing concern for the victim’s mental health* (P148; P105). Respondents described instances where friends or family members reinforced the gaslighting, as the perpetrator was “*able to convince others and yourself that you are acting crazy, and any concerns are all in your head*” (P69).

Modes of Gaslighting

Gaslighting was often defined as a broad behaviour where the perpetrator repeatedly “*says or does things to make someone feel they are the one who is insane and wrong*” (P248). Some respondents described specific modes through which this behaviour is enacted, including a combination of words, actions, facial expressions, body language, or manipulation of the physical environment. Although, the mode was a less important feature in definitions than the response they were designed to elicit i.e., “*the outcome that protects the perpetrator*” (P239). Importantly though, actions and words were both recognised by respondents as capable of producing gaslighting.

Using Other Forms of Abuse to Facilitate Gaslighting

While the reality warping behaviours in gaslighting are distinctive, respondents often included less distinctive abusive behaviours in their definition. Identified behaviours included coercive control, physical abuse, and verbal abuse, which were often described as facilitating

the impact of gaslighting by wearing down the victim's resolve i.e., *"A person calling you awful names, shouting, and swearing. Degrading you so much that you start to believe what they are saying"* (P113). Verbal abuse tactics in particular often blurred with gaslighting, as derogatory comments were used to provoke responses e.g., *"when your partner says hurtful things on purpose to get a response out of you, these comments are usually derogatory and can be things that he knows are sensitive or will upset you, they use this as a way to control your emotions"* (P114). Additionally, gaslighting was also described as a tactic to cover up other forms of abuse, allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability i.e., *"[Gaslighting is] designed to fool a person into believing they are not being abused/mistreated etc"* (P43). In such cases, gaslighting can mask the perpetrators intentions by minimising the abuse or framing it as normal, just a joke, or coming from a place of care (e.g., P81).

Intentionality

The importance of intention in defining gaslighting varied among respondents. Many described it as a 'behaviour' without reference to the intention or consciousness of the perpetrator, e.g., *"saying and doing things to make someone feel they are the one who is insane and wrong"* (P248). However, many also identified gaslighting as an 'intentional' or 'deliberate' act. The aims ranged from causing confusion and doubt in the victim i.e., *"solely enacted to create confusion and stress in the victim to either create an explosion from the victim or to gradually wear them down"* (P162), to harming the victim directly *"When one person deliberately and relentlessly imposes a constructed false reality with malicious intent upon a second person"* (P122), or to gain control *"A deliberate and relentless campaign to gain control over another"* (P186). Some respondents also noted that gaslighting could be unintentional *"Conscious or unconscious attempts to make victims doubt themselves or to hide their own lies"* (P116). Overall, the intention and consciousness behind gaslighting showed significant variability in the respondent's definition.

Relationship Between Perpetrator and Victim

The relationship between the perpetrator and victim was discussed in some definitions, although often indirectly. One key aspect was the power imbalance between them, whether pre-existing or manufactured through gaslighting. One respondent described gaslighting as “*A person or people (usually dominant) who actively diminish and overthrow another person’s (usually subordinate/less powerful) experience and understanding/reality [...] increasing their own power and dominance at the expense of those who are harmed - the dominant grow more powerful and are empowered by the impacts*” (P182). Gaslighting can both maintain or create power imbalances, playing a role in its effectiveness.

Another aspect was the intimacy between the perpetrator and victim. As IPV victim-survivors, respondents have a close relationship with their perpetrators, some described the significance of this intimacy in gaslighting i.e., “*In a relationship, you want to believe them*” (P171). Intimacy, including proximity and trust, was a definitional feature for some respondents.

Support Service Provider Gaslighting Definition Categories

Service provider respondents provided definitions of gaslighting which aligned closely with those of the victim-survivors, with no new major categories emerging. There were, however, minor differences in the sub-categories and varying emphasis on certain aspects, which will be discussed below.

Challenging Perception of Reality

Service providers consistently identified the major categories relevant to challenging perceptions in gaslighting: (a) a perpetrator who challenges the victim’s perception of reality, and (b) a victim who doubts their perception of reality. The only sub-category absent within these major categories was narrative instability, which may be more central to the victim’s perspective due to their daily interactions with the perpetrator. Service providers tended to

focus their definitions on the behavioural pattern and outcomes of gaslighting and identified it as occurring through various modes (i.e., words, action, environmental manipulation). A major category that was not directly addressed was (c) the frequency and intensity of the gaslighting attempts, instead emphasising tactics over patterns within relationship dynamics e.g., *“Being told things that make you question your own sanity”* (P17). Although, there was frequent mention of coercive control, dynamics, and multiple tactics or occurrences, implying a repeated interaction (P05, P07, P14).

Additionally, there was a stronger emphasis on intention in the service provider definitions, with gaslighting either defined as deliberate or manipulative, e.g., *“gaslighting is the deliberate intent to make one person doubt themselves”* (P16). It was never framed as unintentional or unconscious, unlike some of the victim-survivor definitions. It is important to note that there were far fewer service provider respondents than victim-survivor respondents, so these differences may reflect a lack of representation of the service provider population.

Power and Abuse

Service provider respondents identified the role of gaslighting in abuse and its relationship to power. They reflected the major categories from the victim-survivor respondents such as (d) the use of other forms of abuse to facilitate gaslighting, (e) isolation from support, and (h) the relationship between perpetrator and victim. There was a particular focus on how gaslighting functions to create and maintain power in the relationship, e.g., *“this increases the balance of power within the relationship in favour of the perpetrator and increase a victim’s sense of dependency of their abuser”* (P05). Since service providers observed gaslighting from an external perspective, they noted how gaslighting benefits the perpetrator by isolating victims from their support, and concealing abuse. Although these elements were also present in victim-survivor definitions, they were more heavily stressed by service providers.

Discussion

As policy and legislative efforts worldwide increasingly aim to address complex and coercive forms of abuse, it is essential to scrutinise the assumptions underpinning specific definitions. These definitions significantly shape who is included or excluded under official classifications, thereby influencing legal protection, policy approaches, and broader community recognition. As gaslighting has gained increasing prominence in IPV discourse, it is more important than ever to establish an intentional and functional definition. Although the term has been explored across a wide range of literature (e.g., Stern, 2007; Abramson, 2014; Sweet, 2019; Bhatti et al., 2021), there remains an inconsistency in how it is defined. While most definitions agree that gaslighting involves a perpetrator attempting to manipulate or distort the perceptions of their target, other key aspects remain inconsistent or are simply not discussed. This study aimed to define gaslighting through the perspective of IPV victim-survivors and service providers and compare these insights with existing literature. The major findings in this study focus on six key areas; (1) Behaviour, (2) Outcomes, (3) Intention, (4) Repetition, (5) Subsidiary Behaviours, and (6) Power and Intimacy. These findings will be discussed in relation to the current literature, leading to a proposed definition of gaslighting.

Behaviour: Challenging Victim's Perception of Reality

Consistency in implementing gaslighting definitions first requires a clear understanding of the specific behaviours that are identified as constituting 'gaslighting'. Definitions of gaslighting often refer to a general 'behaviour', 'pattern', or 'manipulation' that leads to the victim questioning their own reality or sanity (e.g., Calef and Weinshel, 1981; Roberts and Andrews, 2013; Bhatti et al., 2021). However, definitions vary significantly in whether they include examples of these behaviours, and which ones. For instance, Stark (2019) described two specific behaviours, the first being 'sidestepping' evidence that challenges the perpetrator's credibility, and the second being 'displacement', in which the perpetrator rejects the victim's

judgment due to some perceived ‘deficit’ in their credibility. On the other hand, Sarkis (2018), offered a long list of smaller tactics ranging from lying, to breaking promises, or being obsessed with the victims’ accomplishments. This variability highlights that while gaslighting encompasses a wide range of tactics, there is little consensus on what they are, or how they can be grouped.

One common thread emerging from both literature and respondents’ definitions is the broad behavioural category of ‘a perpetrator challenging victim’s perceptions of reality’. Among victim-survivors, specific tactics such as deception, reversing blame, and presenting inconsistent narratives, were frequently identified as key components of this broader behaviour. Respondents in the current study highlighted deception as a core tactic, manifesting through either fabrication or denial. Deception has similarly appeared in prior literature, including tactics such as lying, denial, misdirection, contradictions, forgetting, or trivialising the victims’ concerns (Bhatti et al., 2021; Dandeleet, 2021; Li and Samp, 2023). Further, prior literature similarly emphasised that this deception could occur on a spectrum, ranging from subtle to bold, and constant to intermittent (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015). Regardless of its form, however, the outcome undermines the victim’s reality and replaces it with falsehoods that benefit the perpetrator (Sweet, 2019).

A further tactic under this broader category, as described by the respondents, was the reversal of blame onto the victim. This tactic often manifests through accusations that the victim is responsible for the perpetrator’s behaviour, or through counteraccusations meant to deflect onto them. Similar blame shifting behaviours have appeared in prior literature, including accusing the victim of overreacting, creating conflict, or even accusing victims of gaslighting (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Stern, 2007). Stark (2019) describes this behaviour as the perpetrator ‘sidestepping’ legitimate challenges by undermining the credibility of the victim by accusing them of causing conflict and exhibiting defective reasoning. The result these

accusations is not to instigate discussion over understanding, but rather to deprive victims of their ability to understand (Catapang Podosky, 2019).

Less frequently discussed in the literature, but mentioned by respondents, are the roles or personas that perpetrators adopt to manipulate the narrative. Stern (2007) described three distinct personas taken on by gaslighters during her experiences providing couples therapy, including 'glamour', 'good guy', and 'intimidator'. Similarly, there were some frequently described personas or narratives adopted by perpetrators in this study, such as playing the victim, adopting a caring or concern role, or positioning themselves as a hero saving the victim from themselves. While some of Stern's elements were present in respondents' descriptions, such as the overt affection associated with 'glamour', or the caring front associated with 'good guy', personas or roles were not as clearly defined or consistent as Stern indicates. Often, these narratives were only used for specific arguments or audiences and were typically unique to the individual circumstances of the relationship. While image control is less frequently discussed in the gaslighting literature, similar tactics are identified in other forms of psychological abuse. For instance, Nancarrow et al., (2020) describe that perpetrators often present themselves as the victim or as calm and in control, to contrast their distressed partner and make them appear less reasonable. For instance, this pattern of 'image management' is reflected in the Hannah Clarke coronial findings, which describe perpetrators carefully managing when and where abuse is expressed to preserve a favourable public image (Coroners Court of Queensland, 2022).

Notably, prior literature often avoids specifying the modes through which gaslighting is enacted. While some explicitly mention gaslighting is a speech act (Catapang Podosky, 2019), others include broader definitions encompassing multiple modes such as physical manipulation of the environment or creating a 'surreal' social environment where friends, family, and support services reinforce gaslighting narratives (Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019). The

current study similarly found a wide range of modes, including words, actions, facial expressions, body language, and manipulation of the physical environment. However, despite the variety of modes, respondents often avoided specifying them in favour of broader terms such as ‘manipulation’ or ‘behaviour’. This suggests that while the modes through which gaslighting can occur are diverse, the core of the definition lies more in the intent to manipulate, and the outcome it elicits.

Outcomes: Victim Doubts their Perception of Reality

A point of contention in gaslighting literature is whether it should be defined by its outcomes (Hailes, 2022). Incorporating outcomes as an official part of a gaslighting definition carries significant implications for determining who is included or excluded from being classified as experiencing this form of abuse. This distinction becomes especially critical if official definitions influence access to legal protections or support for those identified as affected by gaslighting. Historically, the term gaslighting has been described as ‘crazy making’, where manipulation leads the victim to question their sanity (Bach & Goldberg, 1975). However, defining gaslighting purely by its outcome introduces ambiguity, as it fails to differentiate it from other behaviours that may also lead to confusion and self-doubt. This issue is not unique to gaslighting but reflects broader debates in psychology about defining psychological abuse. For example, Marshall (1994) argued that outcome should outweigh intention in definitions of psychological abuse, suggesting that even well-intended behaviour can be classified as abusive if it causes emotional harm. This perspective is echoed in public discourse, where ‘gaslighting’ has been used loosely to describe any conflict in which someone felt disagreed with or confused (Li & Samp, 2023; Sodoma, 2022).

Proponents of outcome dependent definitions of psychological abuse (e.g., Marshall, 1994) emphasise the importance of impact, as this form of abuse is often covert and lacks clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. O’Leary (1999) argued that there

is more consensus on what constitutes physical violence than psychological abuse, as the latter can often be normalised in relationships. However, Follingstad (2007) cautioned that focusing solely on outcomes may overlook the complexities of relationships, where not all behaviours that result in harmful outcomes, such as confusion or self-doubt, are inherently abuse. Individual differences and relationship dynamics may affect how behaviours impact victims, making a purely outcome-based definition potentially too simplistic (Follingstad, 2007). For the term ‘gaslighting’ to maintain explanatory power, it needs to differentiate from other factors that may result in a person experiencing self-doubt, uncertainty, or confusion.

Recent studies by Bhatti et al., (2021) and Hailes (2022) addressed this issue by proposing a two-part model of gaslighting, requiring both the behaviour of challenging the victim’s reality, and the outcome of self-doubt. However, within this study, not all respondents agreed on the relevance of outcomes in defining gaslighting. While common for respondents to include outcome in their definitions, it was also common to describe gaslighting by its behaviours and intended outcomes. This perspective aligns more closely with historical definitions of gaslighting, where the focus was on the perpetrators attempts to control and destabilise their victim, with varying degrees of success (e.g., Calef and Weinshel, 1981; Dorpat, 1996).

Whether gaslighting must result in certain outcomes may hinge on how ‘successful’ outcomes are defined. Prior studies have identified a range of domains where victim-survivors experience outcomes, including recollection, perception, emotions, and reactions (e.g., Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Hailes, 2022; Miano et al., 2021). Bhatti et al.’s (2021) and Hailes’ (2022) two-part models specifically necessitate self-doubt in one or more of these domains as a necessary outcome for gaslighting. While Hailes (2022) acknowledges that self-doubt is not an inevitable result of gaslighting attempts, without it, gaslighting has not taken place.

The gaslighting literature documents a wide range of reactions to gaslighting, including confusion, frustration, anger, withdrawal, disbelief, depression, and anxiety (Abramson, 2014; Dorpat, 1996; Sodoma, 2022; Stern, 2007). While it is plausible that many of these more severe outcomes began with self-doubt, it is difficult to determine at what point milder symptoms, such as confusion and frustration, escalate into self-doubt, thereby constituting gaslighting. Respondents to the current study, as with some prior definitions (e.g., Catapang Podosky, 2019; Stern, 2007), included gaslighting outcomes on a spectrum, with confusion as an early indicator. As Stern (2007) observed in therapeutic contexts, victim-survivors often fluctuate between self-doubt and self-assurance as they resist gaslighting attempts. This raises a critical question, does this fluctuation mean that victim-survivors move in and out of being gaslit, as a function of their resistance? Defining gaslighting, especially as a form of IPV, requires clear and intentional parameters around who is included and excluded from its definition. Through placing emphasis on the outcome, it can imply that an individual is not being abused if the expected outcomes are not evident or if they are in recovery (Follingstad, 2007).

Removing outcomes from the gaslighting definition also runs the risk of weakening the concept of gaslighting. Without considering outcomes, it becomes difficult to distinguish between other behaviours that include deception and gaslighting, which specifically undermines the victim-survivor's trust in their own perceptions and autonomy (Dorpat, 1996; Hailes, 2022). Follingstad (2007) suggested that definitions of psychological abuse need to be more flexible. For instance, outcome may be less relevant in cases where the behaviour is extreme and clearly an act of abuse, or if the outcome is extremely disproportionate to the behaviour. However, a nuanced approach that considers outcome, behaviour, and other factors may be needed to assess whether abuse has taken place in more ambiguous cases.

Several factors may play a role in differentiating gaslighting from other behaviours. For instance, Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) defined bullying by three criteria: repetition, intent

to harm, and power imbalance. It may be possible to view gaslighting as similarly requiring repeated behaviour, intention to harm, and often occurring in the context of power imbalances such as IPV. In this case, the intended harm would include the victim questioning and doubting their ability to perceive reality. This introduces additional complexity, however, which is the concept of intention. The prior two-part models (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes, 2022) sidestepped the issue of intent by focusing on behaviour and outcome. While including intent in the definition removes the reliance on outcomes, it raises further questions about whether gaslighting must be a deliberate act.

Intention

The gaslighting literature has shown inconsistency in its treatment of intention, which is a concern given that intention can be a critical factor, particularly in criminal offences, for determining whether an act qualifies as abusive (Judicial Commission of New South Wales, n.d.). However, intent plays a different role in civil contexts such as protection orders and family law, where the assessment focuses more on patterns of behaviour, fear, and future risk rather than on the perpetrator's subjective mental state. A key issue in gaslighting definitions is the lack of distinction between the perpetrator's aim and their awareness of their aim. While some literature addresses both concepts directly (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Dorpat, 1996), most works blur the lines or use these terms interchangeably (e.g., Klein et al., 2023; Miano et al., 2021). Given the legal importance of intention in recent criminal coercive control offences in Australia and the UK (*Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022* (NSW); *Serious Crime Act 2015* (UK)), the distinction between aim and awareness is critical. The question arises whether current evidence supports the inclusion of either component in a gaslighting definition.

Some respondents in this study included specific aims in their definitions of gaslighting, such as the intent to harm, induce self-doubt, or control the victim. These aims align with

philosophical and sociological theories of gaslighting, in which those aims are commonly identified, or seen as underlying the broader aim of control (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Dorpat, 1996; Sodoma, 2022; Spear, 2020, 2023). For instance, Spear (2020) argued that the perpetrator seeks to strip the victim of independent thought, so as to remove any avenue for criticism or disagreement. It is not enough for the victim to simply agree with the perpetrator, but rather, they must not be capable of challenging them (Spear, 2020). This control distinguishes gaslighting from other forms of harm such as silencing (Spear, 2023).

However, the motives behind gaslighting can be complex and layered, often conflicting with one another. It is a common theory that aims behind gaslighting are not always clear or well-defined, even to the perpetrator themselves (e.g., Calef and Weinshel, 1981; Dorpat, 1996). Abramson (2014) argued that while perpetrators may have surface-level motivations, such as winning an argument or being seen as morally superior, the underlying driver is an absolute intolerance for disagreement and the need to protect their worldview. Although, these motivations are likely in conflict with the perpetrator's desire to maintain a close relationship with the victim. Abramson, however, notes that this a paradigmatic view of gaslighting, and it is vital to consider the dynamics of individual relationships to understand how gaslighting serves the perpetrator's interests.

It is interesting that although many definitions imply aim or intention, few explicitly address whether gaslighting must be a conscious, deliberate process. While some authors assert that gaslighting is exclusively conscious (e.g., March et al., 2023; Roberts & Andrews, 2013), it is more common to argue that gaslighting can be both conscious and unconscious (e.g., Dorpat, 1996; Sweet, 2019) or avoid discussing the role of consciousness altogether (e.g., Miano et al., 2021). The subtle and complex nature of gaslighting makes it difficult to clearly define the perpetrator's exact intentions and level of awareness. Stern (2007) argued that gaslighting interactions often follow an unconscious script enacted by both partners, a view

promoted in recent studies (e.g., Graves and Samp, 2021; Wozolek, 2018). Further, some authors suggest that these scripts or behavioural patterns may be unconsciously inherited from family and early exposure to gaslighting, or developed as habits (Sarkis, 2018; Wozolek, 2018).

In this study, victim-survivor respondents were divided on the issue of intention, mirroring the divide in the literature. Many respondents, consistent with broader trends, described gaslighting as a pattern of behaviour without reference to intention or awareness. However, some viewed gaslighting as an intentional and deliberate act, while a smaller group believed it could be unintentional. The variety of responses suggests that intention may be less relevant to the definition of gaslighting than the observable pattern of behaviour. It is also possible that it may be a reflection of broader methodological issues that persist in the study of intention within psychological abuse, and gaslighting in general.

The first complication in understanding the intention behind gaslighting is the lack of studies involving perpetrators. It is unsurprising that researchers struggle to locate perpetrators who voluntarily identify themselves as gaslighters, particularly given its role in avoiding accountability. When studying intention, the current study and most prior studies have utilised victim-survivor perspectives (e.g., Klein, et al., 2023; Miano et al., 2021). However, since gaslighting involves manipulation and the concealment of this manipulation, asking victim-survivors to determine the true intentions of the perpetrators can be counter-intuitive. March et al (2023) attempted to address this issue by surveying the general public on their acceptance of gaslighting (March et al., 2023), but this approach does not provide insights into the aims and awareness of those who actually do gaslight. The findings from service providers in this study did provide an external perspective, in which they view gaslighting as a deliberate act. However, given the current lack of direct research on perpetrators, it may be premature to make definitive claims about their true motivations and levels of intent.

Beyond methodological challenges, there are significant theoretical and legal considerations surrounding intention. Defining gaslighting by its intention assumes a clear distinction between behaviour that is intended to harm, and behaviour that is not (Follingstad, 2007). Psychological abuse, like gaslighting, exists on a spectrum of social acceptability, and can depend on the context and individuals involved (Larsen, 2016). This complexity is heightened further when non-verbal communication such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions are involved (Tompkinson, Mileva & Burton, 2024). Follingstad (2007) argued that a third-party observer might find it quite challenging to determine whether a perpetrator's behaviour is intended as a joke, a momentary attempt to inflict harm, or an ongoing campaign to undermine the individual. Without input from the perpetrator, intentions must be inferred. However, given gaslighting is characterised by lying and narrative control, there is no guarantee that the perpetrator's input would be truthful.

Even if it were possible to discern the perpetrator's true intentions, the question remains whether a perpetrator would still be considered a gaslighter if it were found that they had good intentions. An early case study by Cawthra et al., (1987) described a young woman who unintentionally gaslit her mother by pretending to be her deceased father's ghost, resulting in her mother's hospitalisation. Despite the young woman's lack of harmful intent, arguably the outcomes in this instance were so severe, intention may be irrelevant. Gass and Nichols (1988) similarly argued that in cases where wives were gaslit by their cheating husbands, the harmful patterns of behaviour such as lying and inducing self-doubt, overshadow the perpetrators' intentions. The importance of intention in defining gaslighting mirrors global legal discussions on criminalising complex and ambiguous behaviours, such as coercive control. This is a multifaceted issue that will be further explored in the implications section below.

Repetition

Given the global shift in IPV research, policy, and legislation from focusing on isolated incidents of violent behaviour to patterns of manipulation (e.g., EIGE, 2021), it is essential to consider the role of repetition in defining gaslighting. In gaslighting literature, repetition is frequently mentioned as a key characteristic, with gaslighting often described as an ongoing campaign, interactional script, or system of oppressive behaviour (Catapang Podosky, 2019; Cull, 2019; Grave and Samps, 2021). However, there is some ambiguity over whether repetition is an essential component of gaslighting. Some papers emphasise repetition as a necessary component of gaslighting (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021; Cull, 2019; Hailes, 2022), others see it as a common but optional feature (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Grave and Samps, 2014; Sodoma, 2022) and some do not directly include repetition as a defining factor at all (e.g., Klein, et al., 2023; March et al., 2023; Miano et al., 2021). This raises an important question about whether gaslighting can occur in a single instance or whether it must be a repeated pattern in order to be classified as gaslighting.

In this study, respondents consistently identified repetition as central to their definitions of gaslighting. They described repeated patterns of behaviour that, despite varying in frequency and intensity, had the cumulative effect of wearing down the victim. This mirrors findings from recent surveys on victim-survivor experiences, which also emphasise the importance that repetition plays in the severity and impact of gaslighting (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes, 2022). Respondents reported variation in the frequency of gaslighting within their relationships. For many, gaslighting was described as constant and pervasive, while others experienced it as context specific. The intensity of gaslighting behaviour also varied, with some describing a gradual and insidious process, while others noted bold, overt gaslighting earlier in the relationship. This diversity reflects findings from Klein, and colleagues (2023), who also identified slow and gradual gaslighting, as well as bold attempts early in the relationship.

Although the onset and intensity of gaslighting varied among respondents in the current study, none directly advocated for a definition that could be applied to a single instance of manipulation.

Repetition clearly plays a significant role in the gaslighting experience across the victim-survivors in this study, suggesting it should be considered a key component of a gaslighting definition. However, it is important to question whether repetition is strictly necessary to define gaslighting, or whether it is a key contributing factor that influences the likelihood of gaslighting leading to harmful outcomes. Given the sample of this study, victim-survivors of IPV, it is understandable that repeated abusive behaviour was pervasive. However, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that a single, particularly severe act of gaslighting might produce similar outcomes. Follingstad and DeHart (2000), in their study of psychologists, found that the frequency and duration of abusive behaviours were the most important factors in classifying actions as ‘psychological abuse’, more so than the perpetrator’s intention or outcome in the victim. They noted, however, that there are exceptions to when a singular behaviour could still be considered abusive if the intention or outcome was sufficiently harmful. Thus, while repetition is exceptionally common in gaslighting in IPV contexts and contributes to the adverse outcomes that victim-survivors experience, the possibility of gaslighting occurring from a single instance cannot be entirely dismissed. If gaslighting were to occur in a single instance, however, it would likely be under extreme or exceptional circumstances.

Subsidiary Behaviours: Isolation, Multiple Parties, and Other Forms of Abuse

Certain behaviours are often associated with gaslighting, though they are not always considered central to its definition. These behaviours are relevant to how gaslighting is understood in policy and legal contexts, as they may reinforce or escalate its impacts. Recognising the interconnected and manipulative nature of gaslighting alongside other forms

of IPV may contribute to more informed consideration of these dynamics within current systems.

The subsidiary behaviours include the use of isolation, the involvement of multiple parties, and the relationship between gaslighting and other forms of abuse. Isolation is a tactic identified as both a facilitator of abuse, and as a form of abuse in the context of IPV (e.g., Abraham, 2000; Ogbe et al., 2020). It causes harm by preventing victim-survivors from accessing support systems, and normalising abusive behaviour (e.g., Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). In the context of gaslighting, isolating serves to cut off the victim from external validation of their thoughts, memories, or feelings, which could counter the perpetrator narratives (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Klein et al., 2023; Sodoma, 2022). Research has shown that the experience of isolation can facilitate and maintain the internalisation of the perpetrator's messaging, whereas access to social supports can act as a buffer, offering the victim alternative perspectives and a safe space to challenge the perpetrator's narratives (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Rodrigues, Mendenhall & Clancy, 2021).

Respondents in this study frequently identified isolation as a gaslighting tactic, manifesting in different ways. Some described physical isolation, where they were unable to access support networks, such as moving to an unfamiliar country. Others experienced psychological isolation, where they were told that no one would believe them, or that reaching out to friends and family would burden them. As has been identified in Sweet (2019) and Hailes (2022), this belief can then be reinforced further through negative experiences with support services, where victims are dismissed or not believed. Another form of isolation discussed by respondents was the involvement of multiple parties. It has been long established that gaslighting can involve multiple parties, with some consciously aiding the deception (e.g., Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Calef & Weinschel, 1981). However, respondents noted that even when third parties were not consciously involved in the manipulation, they could still play a

role in facilitating gaslighting. Respondents described tactics that have been noted in prior literature, such as perpetrators endearing themselves to victim support networks (e.g., Sarkis, 2018) or spreading lies about the victim and turning others against them (e.g., Hailes, 2022), which further isolates the victim and creates a broader sense of ‘surreality’ that extends beyond the immediate relationship (Sweet, 2019).

Individuals who experience IPV often experience multiple forms of abuse (Dutton et al., 2005). Further, Dorpat (1996) argued that gaslighting is ubiquitous in abusive dynamics, often functioning as the ‘common denominator’ of most forms of psychological manipulation, because it allows the perpetrator to control their victim’s thoughts and behaviours. Therefore, it is unsurprising that respondents in this study described experiencing multiple forms of abuse co-occurring with gaslighting. While the relationship between gaslighting and other types of abuse is not often central in gaslighting definitions, it is a consistent theme that arises of victim-survivors’ accounts (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019). The relationship between gaslighting and other forms of abuse, however, is not distinct nor unidirectional. Respondents noted other types of abuse could facilitate gaslighting, as it contributed to a broader effort to wear down the victim’s resistance. This is consistent with past research, which has shown how multiple abusive tactics are combined to create an oppressive environment (e.g., Klein, et al., 2023). However, respondents also described how gaslighting worked to silence them from speaking out about other forms of abuse within the relationship.

Additionally, respondents indicated that the line between gaslighting and other forms of abuse, particularly verbal or emotional abuse, can sometimes be difficult to distinguish. Gaslighting tactics are often intertwined with emotional manipulation, making it challenging to separate one from the other. This overlap underscores the need for researchers to understand the complex, interrelated nature of gaslighting and other abusive behaviours in IPV contexts. While isolation and other forms of abuse may not be central to a definition of gaslighting, they

interact in ways that exacerbate its effects, deepening entrapment and disorientation. Further, it is possible that these behaviours can provide key evidence in legal proceedings, helping to establish patterns of control that may otherwise be difficult to prove through isolated incidents.

Power and Intimacy

A final component to consider for the definition of gaslighting is the relationship between the perpetrator and victim. Gaslighting has been associated with unequal power dynamics (Sweet, 2019) and intimate relationships (Stern, 2007). Despite this, it remains unclear whether these relational contexts are necessary for gaslighting to occur. The prevalence of power imbalances in the context of IPV, and specifically psychological abuse, is well-documented (e.g., Burnett, 2020; Stark, 2007). Psychological abuse has been found to disempower victims and maintain compliance within the relationship (Arias & Pape, 1999). Similarly, gaslighting has been argued to thrive in unequal relationships where perpetrators can weaponise intersecting inequalities to force and maintain compliance (Sweet, 2019). Findings on the precise role of power dynamics in gaslighting, however, have been mixed.

Power dynamics in gaslighting are complex, as multiple forms of power can exist within the one relationship e.g., gender, financial status, social status. There are limited studies directly examining the link between gaslighting and power. Graves and Samp (2021) investigated the role between gaslighting and dependence power (i.e., how much a member of the relationship is dependent upon the other). They found individuals with both high and low dependence power were likely to use gaslighting in a relationship. Further, gaslighting could produce dependence power, whereby the victim becomes dependent upon the perpetrator for sense making. Klein, et al., (2023) investigated social power, and found that survivors of gaslighting overwhelmingly identified as having lower social power than the perpetrator. Further, interviews have also highlighted that power imbalances extend beyond the immediate

relationship, as some partners may have better access to systemic forms of power and credibility (Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019).

While power did not frequently appear in the definition of gaslighting, it was mentioned as a facilitating or mediating factor. Respondents described instances in which power imbalances existed prior to relationships, as well as ones that were manufactured in the relationship. Theories of gaslighting often argue that while anyone can engage in gaslighting, it is especially effective when it takes place against broader power inequalities (Sodoma, 2022). Social power and privilege can add more weight and impact to gaslighting attempts, without excluding people with less social power from being capable of gaslighting (Bhatti et al., 2021). This view aligns with respondents' descriptions of power being manufactured throughout the relationship. Service providers placed greater emphasis on the role that power plays in the effectiveness of gaslighting, though this does not distinguish between instances in which power existed prior to the relationship or was manufactured through the abusive dynamics (Li & Samp, 2023). Therefore, while gaslighting is often described as taking place against a background of power disparity, it remains unclear if this power disparity is required for gaslighting to occur.

Intimacy is a similarly important theoretical component of gaslighting. Sodoma (2022) argued that gaslighting most often occurs in intimate relationships, where the perpetrator can exploit the victim's trust and investment in the relationship as leverage. Previous studies have found that intimacy can create pressure to concede to gaslighting partners for various reasons. These include being institutionally bound to that partner (Sweet, 2019), viewing the partner's perspective as trustworthy and valuable (Spear, 2023), or seeking to resolve conflict (Graves & Samp, 2021). Given that this study's respondents came from an IPV background, a certain level of closeness and intimacy with the perpetrator was inherent to their experiences. Some respondents echoed Sodoma's point that their trust and emotional investment increased their

willingness to believe the perpetrator. However, intimacy did not appear frequently in respondents' definitions of gaslighting, as was the case with power. While intimacy often facilitates gaslighting, it does not seem to be central to the concept itself. As with power, social leverage provided by intimacy plays a role in the success of gaslighting, but it is not necessarily a core element of its definition.

Proposed Definition

This study analysed key elements of gaslighting definitions, addressing the following points:

- I. What are the patterns of behaviour identified as 'gaslighting'?
- II. What are the characteristic outcomes of gaslighting, and are they necessary for gaslighting to have occurred?
- III. What are the intentions of gaslighting, and does gaslighting need to be deliberate?
- IV. Can gaslighting occur once, or must it be repeated?
- V. What are common co-occurring behaviours, and what are their functions?
- VI. What are the roles of power and intimacy in gaslighting?

In developing a definition of gaslighting, the role and significance of these elements were evaluated. It is worth noting that many of these elements had support on each side of the argument, both in prior literature and among the respondents of this study. As a result, the following definition of gaslighting is proposed, while recognising that future research is needed to refine and clarify the boundaries:

Gaslighting is a pattern of manipulative behaviours that target a victim's capacity to perceive and evaluate reality independently. These behaviours can take many forms, vary in severity, and can be enacted through different modes including speech, actions, facial expressions, and manipulation of the physical environment or social networks. Common tactics include lying and denying, shifting blame onto the victim or accusing them of having some

form of mental ‘deficiency’, and providing inconsistent narratives depending on the audience or context.

Gaslighting is characterised by specific and probabilistic outcomes in victims, that result from ongoing exposure to gaslighting behaviours. These outcomes exist on a spectrum of severity, spanning confusion, self-doubt, and at its extreme, loss of identity. This loss of self-trust can apply to one or multiple domains, including recollection, perception, emotions, and reactions.

Gaslighting is almost always a repeated behaviour, as it describes an ongoing campaign to induce these perceptual changes in the victim.

A common subsidiary behaviour to gaslighting is isolating the victim, whether physically, socially, or by involving others in the deception – whether they are aware of this or not. Gaslighting often occurs alongside other forms of abuse, either to conceal the abuse or mutually reinforce it.

Finally, gaslighting often occurs against the background of intimacy and power inequality and can further manufacture inequalities between the perpetrator/s and victim.

Definitional Flexibility

Due to the manipulation and deception involved in gaslighting, it can be difficult to determine how aware or intentional the perpetrator is in their actions. It may be helpful to view gaslighting, as with other forms of coercive behaviour, as something the perpetrator either ‘knows or should have known’ would harm the victim. Through this view, the potential for harm may outweigh the question of intent (Follingstad, 2007).

Further, the relevance of intention in the definition may require a flexible approach that considers each case individually. This means considering the relationship between behaviour, outcome, repetition, and intention. In cases where both behaviour and outcome are severe, the focus on repetition and intention may be less critical for identifying gaslighting. Conversely, in

occasions where the outcome and behaviour are less severe, but repetition and malicious intention are evident, these factors may become more important.

As a minor point, it is important to clarify how this definition relates to the concept of ‘self-gaslighting’, the idea that one can gaslight themselves. While this is a severely under-researched component, it does occasionally appear in public discourse (e.g., Otis, 2019). It has been argued previously that cases of ‘self-gaslighting’ are usually just instances of self-doubt, societal pressure to alter perceptions, or actual gaslighting at the hands of one or multiple people (Dandeleit, 2021). Since this study has defined gaslighting specifically within the context of IPV, which inherently involves interactions between individuals, the concept of ‘self-gaslighting’ is not valid under this framework.

Potential Implications

The proposed definition of gaslighting has significant implications for the interpretation and implementation of policy and legal frameworks, particularly in the context of coercive control. By recognising gaslighting as a pattern of manipulative behaviours aimed at undermining a victim’s perception of reality, this definition provides a clearer basis for identifying gaslighting in both legal and policy contexts. This definition does not align with traditional incident-based models of abuse as it emphasises the importance of repetition and the impact on the victim (see Stark, 2012). However, it is important to emphasise that the discussion in this section focuses primarily on criminal offences. In civil contexts such as protection orders and family law, there is more emphasis on patterns, fear, and future risk rather than subjective intention. Given the subtle and often covert nature of gaslighting, policies and laws that adopt a more flexible approach that allows for the recognition of repetition, context, and both severe and less severe outcomes align more closely with the proposed definition of gaslighting.

Further, it is important to consider how laws that may relate to gaslighting will approach the issue of intention, as the perpetrator's intent is likely to remain unclear in many gaslighting cases. This uncertainty highlights the need for flexibility in definitions, as with other forms of coercive behaviour, where harm may be present even in the absence of clear malicious intent. In criminal law contexts, intention plays a crucial role, such as in differentiating between charges like murder and manslaughter (Judicial Commission of New South Wales, n.d.). By contrast, civil protection orders often require only that the behaviour is likely to cause fear or harm, meaning intent plays a less central role. While intention may seem straightforward at first glance, contextual and behavioural ambiguities can make proving intention highly challenging.

Different countries and states address the issue of intent in ambiguous behaviours in varying ways. For example, in 2023 the U.S Supreme Court revised the definition of stalking, stipulating that a defendant is not considered guilty unless it can be proven they were aware their actions would harm the victim (Dwyer, 2023). Under this interpretation, an individual can cause extreme emotional distress and harm to a victim, provided they genuinely do not perceive their behaviour as harmful (Gumbel, 2023). This approach benefits perpetrators who are adept at hiding their true intentions or remain oblivious to the impact of their actions on others. This is particularly concerning for behaviours such as gaslighting, which is designed to obscure the perpetrators intention and manipulate the beliefs of both the targeted individuals and witnesses. Legal clauses that prioritise proving intention above all risk systematically overlooking some of the most manipulative and controlling forms of IPV.

In contrast, in NSW, Australia, developments in affirmative consent laws have moved in the opposite direction. Recent reforms now require perpetrators in sexual assault cases to actively seek consent, rather than relying on the defence that they were unaware of the victim's lack of consent due to a lack of explicit communication (Department of Communities and

Justice, 2022). This shift highlights a growing recognition of the need to address the complexity of intent and its implications in interpersonal crimes. When it comes to cases of criminal coercive control offences, various countries and states have introduced specific clauses and approaches to address this concern. For example, in the UK an act is considered coercive control if the perpetrator “*knows, or ought to have known*” that their behaviour would have a severe impact on the victim (*Serious Crime Act 2015* (UK)). This approach offers flexibility in cases where intention is difficult to prove, and the severity of the outcome reduces the importance of the intention. These examples demonstrate that the treatment of intention differs significantly across criminal law frameworks in different jurisdictions. It is also important to recognise that patterns of behaviour have long been incorporated in legal responses outside criminal law in Australia, notably through protection orders and stalking legislation introduced in the 1990s (Ogilvie, 2000), which further demonstrates the variation in how jurisdictions conceptualise abusive patterns.

States in Australia have different approaches to addressing the issue of intent even within coercive control offences. For instance, NSW requires a behaviour to be proven intentional in order to be classified as coercive control (*Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022* (NSW)). This act is relatively recent compared to the UK’s 2015 Act, and there remains ongoing debate about whether it should be updated to align more closely with the UK approach. For instance, there is significant discussion over whether the requirement for ‘intention’ should be adjusted to ‘recklessness’, where the disregard of the victim’s wellbeing becomes more important than the intention to harm (McDonough, 2022). However, these less direct approaches can also be open to bias and interpretation. For instance, Tasmania’s *Family Violence Act 2004* in Australia includes a clause stating that the behaviour must be ‘*unreasonably controlling or intimidating*’ (Section 9). While this approach may better address aspects of gaslighting definitions, such as flexibility in the relationship between

repletion, intention, and outcome, it does raise questions about bias. The challenge lies in determining what constitutes ‘unreasonably’ controlling behaviour or, more importantly, what is deemed ‘reasonably controlling’.

It is apparent that considering the practical consequences of including intention, outcome, and repetition in a definition of gaslighting will vary depending on the jurisdiction and existing laws. The varied responses from victim-survivors and service providers in this survey suggest that flexibility around intention, such as that found in the UK Act, might better align with the diversity of experiences and definitions among respondents. In cases where the behaviour is repeated and the outcomes are severe, this approach would mean a behaviour can be classified as gaslighting without direct evidence of intention to harm. However, this still does not account for less extreme cases, where it may be harder to determine whether the behaviour has produced a ‘severe enough’ effect to constitute gaslighting. As more jurisdictions (e.g., in the US) contemplate addressing ambiguous and socially complex behaviours like gaslighting in policy or law, it is crucial to consider how official definitions shape which cases are included or excluded. This discussion is illustrative rather than reform-oriented, highlighting how varying legal thresholds relate to the psychological features proposed here.

Finally, it is important to recognise that if consistent definitions of gaslighting are introduced by governing bodies, these definitions will likely be adopted across communities, front-line services, and in public discourse. This consistency is crucial because the public's understanding of abuse significantly influences the experiences of victim-survivors, both in their daily lives and in their interactions with front-line services or legal systems (Simmons et al., 2011). Gaslighting, as a term, is often misunderstood, which can lead to confusion or minimisation of its impact (Medaris, 2024). Therefore, introducing clearer and more precise boundaries around the definition of gaslighting may improve public recognition and understanding of the severity of this form of abuse. This enhanced recognition could lead to

better peer support, increased help-seeking behaviours, and a more accurate understanding of the abuse's severity in legal settings, such as court proceedings (e.g., Webster et al., 2018). For example, clearer definitions may influence juror perspectives and contribute to more informed judgments about the nature of the abuse, potentially leading to better outcomes for victims.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Due to the limited literature on gaslighting, definitions have been inconsistently operationalised among researchers. This study facilitates discussion and debate about the definition of gaslighting, as many definitional components have been unquestioned or neglected in prior research. With growing attention on criminalising psychological forms of abuse, it is imperative that researchers develop clear and intentional definitions of abstract concepts, like gaslighting. This study offers a definition of gaslighting within the context of IPV, based on surveys of victim-survivors and service providers. This definition provides foundation for future research, promoting a more standardised use of the term 'gaslighting'. A consistent definition will not only strengthen the basis for future studies and enable meaningful comparisons, but also provide a starting point for discussions on how gaslighting can be addressed in policy and practice. While this study has provided clearer structure for the research and operationalisation of gaslighting, there are still some limitations to consider.

The first challenge is the difficulty that surrounds defining and establishing firm boundaries around psychological abuse. Unlike physical violence which can often be measured in checklists or tallies, psychological abuse is deeply socially complex and may not be reducible to discrete instances (Follingstad, 2007). The context in which psychological abuse occurs can often be the determining factor that differentiates abusive from non-abusive behaviour (Capezza, Flynn, Arriaga, 2021). This study has proposed a definition of gaslighting that is situated within the context of IPV. However, due to the social and contextual complexities of gaslighting and the varying experience of respondents, this definition includes

uncertainties and flexibility surrounding the inclusion of key components such as outcome, repetition, and intention. While future research may clarify or confirm these components, not having established firm boundaries around such a complex form of psychological abuse remains a limitation.

This study is also limited by its primary focus on a victim-survivor perspective of gaslighting. While understanding the victims' perspective is crucial for grounding the definition in first-hand experience, this focus restricts the conclusions that can be drawn about the other side of the gaslighting dynamic, the perpetrator. This is particularly important for questions surrounding intention, motivation, and the function that gaslighting serves for perpetrators. Gaining insight from both sides of the dyad could provide a more comprehensive view of gaslighting, as there may be interactions and dynamics that are overlooked in a one-sided definition, especially since very few studies have examined the possibility of bi-directional forms of gaslighting or dysfunctional scripts that develop in relationships. That being said, it is important to emphasise that superficially similar behaviours enacted by victim-survivors and perpetrators are not equivalent. Where behaviours are bidirectional, assessment must account for power and context (see Stark, 2007). Isolated or reactive actions by victim-survivors do not equate to the patterned, strategic use of similar behaviours by a perpetrator.

Future research should include a broader range of perspectives to enhance understanding of gaslighting, given its socially complex and insidious nature. Including the viewpoints of perpetrators, bystanders, could significantly clarify the boundaries of the gaslighting definition and inform more effective interventions., our focus was on developing a functional definition informed by diverse perspectives. Future research can build on these defined elements of gaslighting by using larger, more representative samples to conduct prevalence studies.

It is also crucial to recognise that gaslighting is heavily influenced by social and cultural contexts, and this study has been undertaken with an Australian sample. Given the inconsistency in gaslighting research, it is not surprising that so few studies have investigated cultural differences in the use of gaslighting (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021). Cultural differences likely play a large role in the experience, recognition, and perpetration of gaslighting. This is particularly concerning as gaslighting is a form of isolation and control, which are tactics that are disproportionately weaponised against women from immigrant backgrounds (Alsinai et al., 2023). While the Australian population, and sample involved in this study, do come from diverse backgrounds, it is important for future research to directly investigate specific cultural perspectives and experience related to this form of abuse.

Conclusion

With the increasing use of the term ‘gaslighting’ in public discourse, and the growing focus on covert abuse across research, policy, and legal frameworks, establishing a clear and deliberate definition of ‘gaslighting’ within IPV scholarship is essential to support more consistent understanding and application within existing systems. This study identified significant inconsistencies in previous definitions and addressed these issues by incorporating the voices of victim-survivors and service providers. By proposing a definition of gaslighting that is grounded in lived experience and diverse perspectives, this research aimed to enhance consistency in how gaslighting is understood and applied in both academic and practical contexts. Additionally, by examining the more complex and abstract aspects of gaslighting, this study sought to encourage deeper conversations about implications for future policy and practice. Overall, using a deliberate and consistent definition of gaslighting will ultimately lead to better recognition and responses to this insidious form of abuse.

Chapter 3: Modelling Gaslighting in Intimate Partner Violence

Preface

The content of this chapter is based on an article published in *Psychology, Crime and Law*.

Darke, L. Paterson, H, Dhillon, H, and van Golde, C. (in press). Finding Clarity in Gaslighting: A Comprehensive Model from Victim-Survivor and Support Service Provider Perspectives. *Psychology, Crime and Law*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2025.2591116>

Abstract

Despite the widespread prevalence of psychological abuse and growing use of the term “gaslighting”, research modelling this dynamic remains limited. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the nuanced dynamics of gaslighting within intimate partner violence, incorporating individual, relational, and environmental factors, in order to improve understanding and help inform more effective clinical, policy, and legal response for victim-survivors. The study used an online open-ended survey to capture the experiences of 235 victim-survivors of gaslighting and 17 support service providers. Data was analysed using qualitative content analysis to develop categories that represent different factors involved in gaslighting. These categories were used to build a conceptual model, covering the individual and relational dynamics, outcomes, and environmental factors associated with gaslighting in IPV. Key findings included identifiable patterns of behaviour, the critical role of access to support, the influence of pre-existing relationship dynamics, the impact of cultural attitudes, and a range of both immediate and long-term impacts on victim-survivors. Findings present a comprehensive view of the various ways gaslighting manifests, and the underlying factors that reinforce it. It emphasises the need for improved public awareness, targeted interventions, and training for professionals to better recognise and support victim-survivors, as well as the necessity for future research to explore the perspectives of perpetrators, diverse cultural impacts, and disentangle gaslighting from other forms of abuse.

Introduction

Historically, research on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has largely focused on physical and sexual violence, often emphasising isolated instances of abuse (AIHW, 2024). Early studies concentrated on physical aggression towards women, particularly acts requiring medical attention or involving verbal threats of violence (Woodin et al., 2014). Despite some of these studies advocating for more representative models of IPV that include non-physical abuse (Straus, 1979), physical violence was viewed as the most severe form of abuse in intimate relationships for decades (O’Leary, 1999). While IPV is now acknowledged as a complex issue that encompasses different forms of abuse, such as verbal abuse, humiliation, isolation, economic control, stalking, and harassment (Follingstad & DeHard, 2000), understanding of these forms of abuse is still lagging. For instance, while the World Health Organisation (2018) reports that 30% of women globally over the age of 15 experience IPV, this figure excludes non-physical forms of abuse. In Australia, emotional abuse and physical abuse rates are reported as equal, with 23% of women experiencing each since turning 15 (AIHW, 2024). Further, recent studies suggest that up to 28% of the general population in Australia may have experienced coercive control, a form of IPV characterised by patterns of manipulative behaviours aimed at isolating and controlling a person (AIFS, 2024).

Victim-survivors have consistently described psychological abuse as the most damaging form of abuse they’ve endured (e.g., Follingstad et al., 1990; Walker, 1979). It has been linked to severe outcomes such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, chronic illness, and has even been considered a stronger predictor of PTSD than physical violence (e.g., Arias & Pape, 1999; Dye, 2020; Rogers & Follingstad, 2014). Recent meta-analyses and review studies reinforce the profound mental health consequences of psychological IPV, highlighting strong associations with PTSD, depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms that can be as severe as those from physical and sexual abuse (Dokkedahl et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2022;

Yastıbaş-Kaçar et al., 2024). This type of abuse is particularly damaging because it directly undermines a victim-survivor's sense of self (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Due to its often-invisible nature, research on psychological abuse has historically emphasised more overt forms such as verbal abuse, despite these having less impact on the victim-survivors self-image (Burnett, 2020). Researchers like Marshall (1999) have long advocated for a more inclusive understanding of psychological harm, as covert forms are often overlooked in favour of clear acts of aggression and domination. Additionally, interventions aimed at preventing physical harm often fail to address controlling or psychologically abusive behaviours (Stark, 2007). To develop appropriate research and interventions for covert, non-physical forms violence, these behaviours must first be studied and understood independently of physical violence.

Gaslighting is a concept that has gained widespread public attention in recent years, but despite its popularity, it remains theoretically fragmented and often misunderstood. Debates continue over key aspects of its definition such as whether intentionality is necessary, if repetition defines the behaviour, and whether gaslighting should be defined by its outcomes (Abramson, 2014; Darke et al., 2025b; Hailes & Goodman, 2023). These definitional ambiguities have significant theoretical and practical implications, influencing how gaslighting is identified, understood, and addressed in both academic and policy contexts. To provide conceptual clarity and address these debates, this study adopts the definition developed in Chapter 2. This framework draws on victim-survivor narratives and defines gaslighting as a pattern of psychological abuse that targets a person's capacity to independently perceive and evaluate reality. According to the findings in Chapter 2, gaslighting involves cumulative behaviours (e.g., lying, denial, blame-shifting) that destabilise the victim-survivor's self-trust. This results in profound disruption to the ability to make sense of one's own experiences, emotions, and judgments. This conceptualisation distinguishes gaslighting from broader IPV frameworks that reference similar abusive tactics (such as the Duluth Power and Control

Wheel; Pence & Paymar, 1993, Coercive Control; Stark, 2007, and Intimate Terrorism; Johnson, 2008). While those models treat tactics such as lying, manipulation, and blame-shifting as part of a broader pattern of control and domination, gaslighting specifically targets and undermines the victim-survivor's ability to interpret reality itself (Abramson, 2014; Hailes & Goodman, 2023).

Despite concerns about definitional creep and overuse in popular culture (Medaris, 2024), recognising gaslighting as a distinct phenomenon is essential. Even if the term does overlap with other tactics of psychological abuse, the strong gravitation towards this specific conceptualisation by both victim-survivors and practitioners suggests that it captures a meaningful and underarticulated aspect of abuse that existing models have not adequately addressed (see Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Bhatti et al., 2021; Darke et al., 2025b). Further, its unique psychological mechanisms have serious implications for victim-survivors, affecting mental health, help-seeking, and credibility in legal contexts (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). The term's cultural prominence, however, also risks trivialising its severity and complexity, which underscores the need for rigorous academic precision rather than dismissal. For a more detailed examination of definitional inconsistencies and their theoretical and legal consequences, readers are referred to Chapter 2. Beyond clear definitions, understanding gaslighting's distinct dynamics is vital for advancing IPV research, policy, and intervention.

Due its inconsistent definition and measurement, empirical studies on gaslighting are limited. However, behaviours associated with gaslighting have been shown to be commonly used against victim-survivors of IPV (Sweet, 2019). Although few surveys measure gaslighting specifically, some psychological abuse scales include related behaviours (Marshall, 1999; Tolman, 1989). For instance, when measuring the impact of different forms of psychological abuse on women, Sackett and Saunders (1999) included an item, "*how often does your partner suggest you're crazy or stupid*" (p. 13), under the category 'ridicule her traits'. This category

was rated by victim-survivors as the most severe form of psychological abuse and was found to be a strong predictor of depression and low self-esteem. Similarly, a 2014 phone survey of IPV victim-survivors by Warshaw et al. found that over 85% of respondents reported experiencing gaslighting tactics, such as being labelled ‘crazy’ by their partner. Recent studies have begun to examine gaslighting specific outcomes, with initial findings indicating significant impacts on victim-survivor’s self-trust and access to support services (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2019). While forms of psychological abuse like isolation, verbal abuse, and public humiliation, have been studied within their social and cultural contexts (e.g., Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010), gaslighting is less explored as a distinct form of abuse with unique functions and shaped by structural, cultural, and social conditions (Sweet, 2019).

Globally, courts are shifting away from single incidents models toward recognising the cumulative harm caused by patterns of coercive and psychological abuse (Stark, 2012). While coercive control laws are emerging internationally to reflect this shift (EIGE, 2021), their implementation remains in early stages, with ongoing debate about their role and effectiveness. In Australia (*Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022* (NSW)) and the UK (*Serious Crime Act 2015* (UK)), such laws have been introduced, sparking growing interest in understanding how covert forms of abuse are used to control and manipulate victim-survivors. Gaslighting has been argued to be separate to coercive control (Hightower 2017), a form of coercive control (March et al., 2023), and as a method used alongside to ‘wear down’ victim-survivors and make them easier to control (Hailes, 2022). Graves and Samp (2021) argued that gaslighting can be viewed as a form of control, as it dictates the thoughts and actions of its target. However, Hailes (2022) suggests that it can also exist simply to harm, rather than to control, in which case it would be classified as psychological abuse. A submission to the NSW Joint Selection Committee on Coercive Control (Easteal, 2021) emphasised that gaslighting erodes self-trust, which is central to reinforcing control in IPV dynamics. Whether seen as part

of coercive control, or a separate form of psychological abuse, gaslighting plays a critical role in controlling and isolating victim-survivors. Therefore, it is essential to research gaslighting's role within IPV to better inform practice, policy, and legal interventions.

Improved recognition of gaslighting's context and impact could influence how victim-survivors are treated by authorities and support the development of interventions that respond to gaslighting mechanisms and outcomes. It may also help inform how existing and emerging laws addressing patterns of control and psychological abuse are interpreted and applied (e.g., EIGE, 2021), rather than suggesting the creation of gaslighting-specific offences. For example, the implementation of coercive control laws in NSW, Australia, has prompted initiatives to update police training, emphasising the identification and response to indicators of coercive control, trauma, and patterns of repeated abuse (Dowling, 2024). However, in cases in IPV, police are expected to exercise discretion, including assessing the severity of the abuse, the role of those involved, the likelihood of escalation, and whether a potential investigation would be beneficial or successful (Miles-Johnson, 2022). The extent of police training and their ability to recognise complex forms of abuse can significantly influence whether individuals are granted legal protection or referred to welfare services (Dowling, 2024). Therefore, the ability to accurately identify and understand the dynamics and outcomes of coercive and manipulative forms of abuse represents a critical barrier to victim-survivors accessing support.

Furthermore, understanding gaslighting's nuanced impacts on mental health and autonomy may contribute to trauma-informed approaches in the justice system, ensuring victim-survivors are better supported during reporting, investigation, and legal proceedings. While there is limited research as it stands on the impacts of gaslighting within a psycho-legal framework, its effects on eroding self-trust, impairing memory, and creating confusion may pose significant barriers in legal settings, where credibility often hinges on the ability to present a clear and consistent narrative (Epstein & Goodman, 2019). As a result, victim-survivors of

gaslighting may be placed a higher risk of being discredited in court, further compounding the harm of the abuse and limiting access to justice (Sweet, 2019).

Finally, as gaslighting has become overused in public discourse, its severity within IPV contexts is often poorly understood. Misrepresentation of gaslighting diminishes public awareness of its profound impacts and its role in reinforcing patterns of control and abuse. Campaigns aimed at increasing the recognition of gaslighting within communities are essential for improving community responses to covert and manipulative forms of abuse (e.g., Webster et al., 2018). Informal support networks, such as friends and family, are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing IPV (Simmons et al., 2011). Therefore, fostering a deeper understanding of the complex ecosystem in which gaslighting occurs is crucial to improving community responses and support for victim-survivors. Developing comprehensive models of gaslighting dynamics within IPV can help clarify the mechanisms and outcomes, providing a solid foundation for education and awareness campaigns. Improved recognition not only validates the experiences of victim-survivors but contributes to the development of prevention strategies, public campaigns, and improving community responses to IPV.

Prior Modelling Efforts

Research into the context, dynamics, and patterns of gaslighting remain relatively sparse, particularly in comparison to smaller aspects of gaslighting such as the influence of personality traits (e.g., Miano et al., 2021, March et al., 2023). Recent attempts to address this gap include models of gaslighting dynamics in IPV such as Sweet (2019), Hailes (2022), and Klein, et al (2023). Sweet (2019) ‘Situational Map’ of gaslighting, emphasised how gender-based power inequalities, institutional reinforcement, and gaslighting tactics create a broader sense of ‘surreality’. This map, based on interviews with 43 women IPV victim-survivors and 55 IPV professionals, critiqued existing theories for failing to account for the broader social environments that enable gaslighting. Sweet’s model intentionally focuses on the social and

institutional contexts that lend power to gaslighting and is not designed to account for the individual and dyadic factors that take place within relationships. While important, this focus limits the map's ability to explain the nuanced, relational aspects of gaslighting that are crucial for understanding its full impact with IPV.

Klein, et al., (2023) developed the 'Gaslighting Experience in Romantic Relationships' (GERR) model, which explores the behavioural dynamics between partners in gaslighting relationships. Their model, based on a survey of 65 (48 women) participants, outlines the stages of gaslighting and the patterns that emerge before, during, and after the relationship. However, the GERR model does not fully engage with the broader social and environmental factors that Sweet (2019) argued are central to understanding how gaslighting operates. This leaves a gap in comprehensively addressing how social power structures and external factors contribute to gaslighting in relationships.

Hailes (2022) developed a two-part model of gaslighting, which defines it by both behaviour and outcome. Drawing on interviews with 15 women IPV survivors, Haile's model integrates elements from both Sweet (2019) and Klein, et al., (2023), addressing relational dynamics and broader environmental factors such as cultural messaging and institutional distrust. While Hailes (2022) offers valuable insights, its limited sample and narrow scope warrant further research to explore the variation and breadth of gaslighting experiences across a broader population. Moreover, Hailes (2022) model does not incorporate the perspectives from IPV professionals, whose expertise could offer important insights into how gaslighting operates not only in domestic settings but also in institutional contexts.

The current study seeks to address these gaps by examining the interplay between individual, relational, and environmental factors that shape gaslighting experiences within IPV. By including insights from both victim-survivors and service providers, this study ensures a comprehensive understanding of gaslighting dynamics that incorporates a wider range of

perspectives and experiences. With a larger and more diverse sample, this research aims to capture the complex variations in gaslighting experiences that previous models may have missed. This approach will allow for the development of a more comprehensive model of gaslighting that provides a stronger framework for understanding its dynamics within IPV. A comprehensive model will help inform educational and public awareness campaigns, enhance the identification of victim-survivors by authorities and community-facing services, and support the ways existing and emerging laws and policies addressing coercive and psychologically abusive behaviours are interpreted and applied.

Transparency and Openness

This study was preregistered on AsPredicted and can be accessed at the following link <https://aspredicted.org/hjgf-2mcb.pdf> As the participants of this study did not provide written consent to publicly share their raw responses, and due to the sensitive and potentially identifiable nature of this information, the supporting data is not openly available. An expanded method and research materials are available on Open Science Framework <https://osf.io/x3tuk>

This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2021/532) on August 20, 2021.

Method

Given the limited body of research that currently exists on gaslighting, it is more appropriate to use qualitative descriptive methods (e.g., descriptive phenomenology, content analysis, thematic analysis), as these involve the least amount of interpretation, and adhere more closely to the descriptions used by the respondents (Doyle et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2000). Given that gaslighting as a phenomenon is designed to invalidate and misrepresent the words of victim-survivors, it is especially important for this research to represent the experiences of this population in their words (e.g., Hailes & Goodman, 2023).

This study employed an online open-ended survey, allowing respondents to self-administer and express themselves in their own words. This method has been advocated for and employed in previous qualitative research as it captures perspectives from vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations, while minimising participant burden (e.g., Dickinson & Adams, 2014). This approach produces a ‘wide-angle’ view, capturing a broader range of sense-making, experiences, and perspectives across a population (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). This method is particularly beneficial for viewing patterns across responses and investigating emerging, under-researched topics, such as gaslighting (Braun et al., 2021). Additionally, given the sensitive nature of gaslighting in the context of IPV, and the self-doubt often experienced by victim-survivors (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021), the anonymity of an online format may encourage greater disclosure and participation from individuals who might be less inclined to engage in face-to-face studies (Neville et al., 2016).

Participants and Recruitment

To participate in this study, respondents had to (1) identify as victim-survivors of gaslighting in IPV or have professional experience working with victim-survivors, (2) be over 18, and (3) be fluent in English. Advertisements were distributed through Australian domestic violence support organisations and at a Family and Domestic Violence Conference, with additional recruitment via Facebook groups and word-of-mouth using convenience and snowball sampling. Of the 299 victim-survivors and 19 service providers who began the survey, the final sample included 235 victim-survivors and 17 service providers, after excluding incomplete or non-serious responses (e.g., one-word responses).

During data collection, responses were monitored for content. Once the responses were sufficiently thick (i.e., diverse perspectives), rich (i.e., detailed and in-depth responses), and new submissions were becoming repetitive, saturation was reached and data collection was stopped (Johnson et al., 2020). According to Braun et al., (2021), the sample size for qualitative

online surveys depends on the research scope, topic, and response detail. Large exploratory topics like gaslighting require larger samples to capture diverse perspectives and experiences. A final sample size of 252 (victim-survivors and service providers) was deemed substantial and appropriate to address the research questions (Braun et al., 2021).

Table 3.1

Demographics of Victim-Survivor Participants

Sample characteristics	n	%	M (range)	SD
Gender				
Women	226	96%		
Men	9	4%		
Age (years)			43 (20 – 79)	9.79
Residence				
Australia	235	100%		
Birth Location				
Australia	193	82%		
Outside Australia	42	18%		
Longest Residing Location				
Australia	209	89%		
Outside Australia	26	11%		

For each of the open-ended questions, participants' responses were included in the inductive or deductive group, depending on when saturation was hit for that question. The demographics between these two groups are highly similar, however, for a visual breakdown of demographic allocation per question please refer to tables in Appendix C. The overall victim-survivor sample demographics are depicted in Table 3.1. The service provider sample demographics and work experience can be seen in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2*Demographics of Service Provider Participants*

Sample characteristics	n	%	M (range)	SD
Gender				
Women	17	100%		
Age (years)			48 (33 – 66)	8.99
Residence				
Australia	17	100%		
Birth Location				
Australia	11	65%		
Outside Australia	6	35%		
Longest Residing Location				
Australia	15	88%		
Outside Australia	2	12%		
Job Experience (years)			13.7 (2 – 30)	9.10
Job Titles				
Specialist counsellor	11	65%		
Psychologist	2	12%		
Social Worker	1	6%		
Case Worker	1	6%		
Social Wellbeing Worker	1	6%		
Family Support Worker	1	6%		

Procedure

Survey responses were collected via the Qualtrics platform. Participants accessed the survey through an advertised link and answered a triage question to identify as either a victim-survivor or service provider. First, they completed demographic questions (e.g. gender, age,

longest residing location), after which respondents were presented with nine open-ended questions about gaslighting (see Appendix A for full questionnaire).

The open-ended questions were purposefully designed to allow participants to describe their own understanding and experiences of gaslighting, enabling an inductive exploration of the construct rather than imposing a predetermined operationalisation prior to data collection. The length of responses varied significantly across questions and participants, ranging from 3 words (e.g., “see previous response”), to as many as 3158 words. Shorter answers were more common in cases where questions overlapped, e.g., ‘what signs would you look for in yourself’ and ‘what signs would you look for in someone else’. All questions were designed to be open-ended and include minimal inference. A final question was included which gave participants an opportunity to provide any additional information they felt had not been covered. For each participant, a \$5 donation was made to Women’s Community Shelters as reimbursement.

Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative content analysis as outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), supplemented by iterative categorisation outlined by Neale (2016). Qualitative content analysis is suitable as it is descriptive, inductive, and allows for the development of categories and sub-categories to represent factors involved in gaslighting (e.g., Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As this study aimed to identify and describe the range of experiences of gaslighting, it treated all participants' descriptions as equally relevant, rather than emphasising proportion or prevalence. Further, to strengthen the findings of the content analysis, there were three points of triangulation i.e., the inductive group, deductive group, and the service providers. Using Morgan's (2019) typology of triangulation, the three points of comparison in this study enhance the credibility of findings by examining the convergence of results from three independent respondent groups. Additionally, comparing the perspectives of victim-survivors and support service providers

adopts a complementarity approach, as their insights both complement each other and offer distinct angles for understanding the same phenomenon. The analysis process was conducted in five stages.

First, the data was prepared and familiarised by organising the responses by length in separate documents (i.e., one document per question). Next, data were open coded with three coders per question, which involved inductively generating codes from the data. This process was completed with the three coders independently, checking in with each other every 10-15 responses. Codes were progressively refined and grouped into broader categories and sub-categories. Once all coders agreed that the codes and categories were clear, mutually exclusive, and no new ones were emerging, saturation was reached. While all categories are mutually exclusive, there may be some overlap in focus as this study aims to provide a comprehensive description of different variants and functions of gaslighting behaviour. Saturation was hit at different points for each question, ranging from 55 – 122 responses. Next, the finalised codes were deductively applied to the remaining responses to validate these on a second group of respondents. This process involved checking that the codes were clear and accurately accounted for experiences described by the second group.

Next, all coders met to discuss the development of a conceptual model. Categories and sub-categories from the different questions were organised under more abstract categories (e.g., outcomes, environment, dynamics), and any categories repeated across questions were merged. This process resulted in a structured framework that links the categories to illustrate how different aspects of gaslighting operate in relation to one another. This framework can be referred to as a conceptual model because it organises these connected categories into an integrated whole, rather than presenting them as separate themes (Charmaz, 2006; Jabareen, 2009). Finally, the deductive coding process was repeated with the caseworker sample, by validating the model categories and noting down any differences. These data were used solely

for triangulation and validation; the model content itself derives exclusively from victim-survivor accounts.

The coding team comprised the lead researcher and six undergraduate psychology students. Following an iterative training process (Neale, 2016), the coders independently examined the data for emerging concepts, then collaboratively discussed their findings to reach consensus. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the primary objective was to foster shared understanding and generate richer insights rather than ensuring replicability across coders (Armstrong et al., 1997; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Coding decisions were finalised only after all three coders reached agreement.

Trustworthiness

We aimed to ensure trustworthiness in this research through various strategies, guided by the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, outlined by Forero et al., (2018) and Stenfors et al. (2020). To enhance credibility and transferability, we triangulated responses across both victim-survivors and support service providers to capture a broad range of perspectives, and we included counterpoints where applicable (Forero et al., 2018). We also maintained accountability during the analysis by training coders to derive codes directly from the data and holding regular discussions to ensure agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, improving both rigor and credibility. Dependability was ensured through a detailed and transparent account of the data collection and analysis process, allowing other researchers to replicate the methodology (Stenfors et al., 2020). To maintain confirmability, we ensured a close connection between the data and the findings, using direct quotes and examples to support our conclusions (Stenfors et al., 2020).

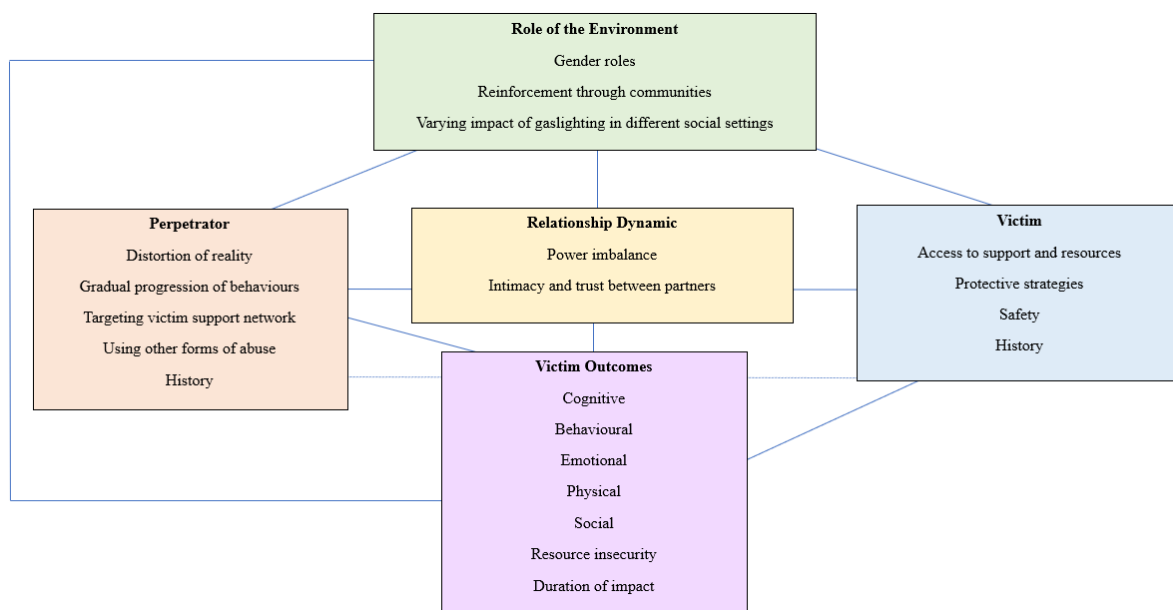
Reflectivity and accountability were practiced throughout, with ongoing documentation of our thoughts, discussions, and decisions (Forero et al., 2018). While coders ranged across ethnicity and gender, the writing and interpretation was predominately conducted by white

women living in Australia. We are aware of how this shapes our understanding of the cultural influences on gaslighting in IPV victim-survivors. Although open-ended survey questions allowed for specific cultural factors to emerge, we did not explicitly ask about racial or cultural identity. This will limit the insight this model provides into the role of specific cultural identities in gaslighting. We also acknowledge that our feminist beliefs and advocacy for victim-survivors influenced our decision to focus on their experiences, which is further addressed in the limitations section.

Results

Figure 3.1

Conceptual Model of Individual, Relational, and Ecological Factors in Gaslighting



Terminology

As gaslighting is a complex social phenomenon, current literature has not fallen firmly on one set of labels for those involved. Authors have referred to individuals experiencing gaslighting as victims, gaslightees, targets, and survivors (e.g., Sweet, 2019; March et al., 2023; Graves & Samp, 2021; Klein et al., 2023). Individuals using gaslighting have been referred to as perpetrators, abusers, gaslighters, or harming partners (Bhatti et al., Li & Samp, 2023; Hailes

& Goodman, 2023). The respondents in this study come from a wide range of circumstances, with many continuing to experience abuse or long-term impacts of gaslighting. However, a consistent factor across respondents is that they had been targeted and victimised by perpetrators of gaslighting. It is for this reason, and for conceptual clarity, that when referring to the concept of gaslighting we will be using the terms ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’. However, when discussing the individuals who contributed to this study, we will use the term ‘victim-survivor’ to acknowledge both the ongoing harm and impact of abuse that many are still experiencing, as well as the strength and resilience of these individuals (AIFS, 2024)

Perpetrator

Categories relevant to the perpetrator and their contribution to the relational dynamic emerged. These categories included (a) reality distortion, (b) gradual progression of behaviours, (c) targeting the victim’s support network, (d) using other forms of abuse with gaslighting, and (e) the perpetrator’s behavioural history (see Figure 3.1).

Reality Distortion

A characteristic behaviour of perpetrators in relationships is reality distortion, which involves various tactics aimed at invalidating the victim’s perceptions and shaping reality to serve the perpetrators agenda. While these tactics may vary by individual experience, certain key strategies consistently emerged including deception, invalidating victim’s perceptions, accusations of being ‘crazy’ or unreliable, reversing blame, and controlling their image both within and outside the relationship.

Deception

An essential element of reality distortion is the perpetrators’ tendency to deceive. Respondents described lies or dishonest behaviours unique to their personal experiences of gaslighting. However, these behaviours were categorised into three forms of deception: denial, fabrications, and manipulation of the environment. Denial involved refusing to acknowledge

or validate victim's memories or experiences, claiming that they didn't happen even when faced with evidence. Perpetrators were also described as fabricating lies to suit their argument e.g. *"he doesn't even like you. He only is nice to you because I told him to be"* (P204). Respondents noted instances where perpetrators fabricated things the victim allegedly said or did, then used the victim's denial of these events as proof they were losing touch with reality. Importantly, respondents described how perpetrators deliberately gathered *"detailed observations"* on the victim to weaponise or develop more effective lies (P162). This deception extended to the environment, with perpetrators intentionally altering it to confuse the victim. Examples included moving or hiding objects and controlling young children to involve them in the deception.

Invalidating victim's perceptions

Gaslighters often challenge the victims' ability to perceive reality by consistently invalidating and disagreeing with their perceptions. These challenges target various domains, such as recollection *"you know you don't have the best memory"* (P66), perception *"you're imagining things"* (P105), feelings *"you're so sensitive"* (P87), and reactions *"you're overreacting"* (P171). These challenges insinuate that the victim's judgements are incorrect, causing them to seek validation from others. Initially, this leads to the invalidation of the victim's thoughts or experiences. Over time, these behaviours can erode the victim's ability to trust their own perception of reality, as they *"lose trust in their own memory, mind, or feelings"* (P28).

Accusing victim of being 'crazy' or unreliable

A common behaviour reported to distort the victim's reality was accusing them of being unreliable, either by pathologising them, or claiming they were making things up. Respondents described being pathologised when their partner labelled their behaviour, thoughts, or reactions as *"mentally ill"* (P09). This included direct accusations of being *'crazy'* or expressing concern

that the victim ‘needs to get help’. Perpetrators also weaponised existing or past mental health issues, claiming these made the victim less reliable e.g., “[he would] *turn the gas down while I’m cooking, blaming it on my ADHD* (P43)”. Respondents also reported being accused of lying or making things up to frame their accounts as unreliable e.g., “[he would] *say you’re making up stories*”. While the specific methods varied, the result was to make victims question their ability to evaluate their own perceptions.

Reversing blame

Respondents described perpetrators not only refusing to take responsibility for their actions but shifting blame onto the victim. This reversal of blame arose in two main ways: projecting their own actions or thoughts onto the victim, or deflecting blame with counter accusations. Respondents recounted instances where perpetrators projected their actions onto the victim e.g., “*if the perpetrator is cheating, [they would start] accusing the victim of cheating*” (P06). This behaviour spanned various topics including lying, selfishness, or even accusing the victim of gaslighting. Perpetrators were also described as using counter accusations to avoid accountability, for instance they would “*accuse wronged person of something entirely different to knock them off balance*” (P64). In other instances, perpetrators baited or berated the victim until they reacted emotionally, then shifted the focus to the victim’s reactions, framing it as the ‘source of the problem’.

Image control within and outside the relationship

Respondents described perpetrators as trying to maintain a narrative that portrays themselves in a positive light or damages the victim’s reputation. This narrative was pushed within the relationship, and to people outside of it (e.g., family, friends, colleagues). While the narrative content varied, perpetrators used it to present different personas, minimise their own impact, and tarnish the victim’s reputation. Respondents noted inconsistencies in the perpetrator’s self-narrative, as they changed their outward persona depending on the audience

or situation. Some described how perpetrators acted differently in public than at home “[He would act] *charming in front of everyone else so when you try to speak out you are not believed*” (P184). Others noted that the persona shifted moment to moment, based on the perpetrator’s agenda.

Several common perpetrator personas emerged across the respondents, i.e., playing the victim, playing the saviour, acting charming and/or unassuming, or taking on an authoritative role. When playing the victim, perpetrators claimed the relationship was harming their mental health, accusing the victim of abuse or suggesting they suffered due to the victim’s ‘unreasonable’ reactions, e.g., “*claiming to be bullied, and suggesting that the other person is difficult to deal with*” (P233). This narrative was often shared directly with the victim or used to influence others e.g., “*They will portray themselves as the victim of your behaviour to others face to face, social media and other forms of electronic media*” (P175).

When playing the saviour, perpetrators framed themselves as making sacrifices to ‘save’ the victim, presenting their actions as motivated by their concern for the victim’s wellbeing, “*They will have conversations with close family and friends about your problems and how they are only trying to love and support you*” (P175). This approach further invalidated the victim, as victim challenges to the perpetrator’s control would be reframed as a concerning act of poor mental health. These were complicated further, when perpetrators adopted a charming, unassuming persona, telling convincing stories to both the victim and others.

Additionally, they often assumed an authoritative role, using confidence and persuasion to prevent challenges or control the direction of conversation, “*They always have to win, even when it’s a silly point. They like and need to feel superior*” (P147).

Perpetrators controlled their image within and outside the relationships to minimise the impact of their actions. Within the relationship, when victims identified abusive behaviour,

they were often met with responses such as “*that’s normal*”, “*it’s just a joke*”, or “*I only lied to avoid conflict*” (P43). These minimising responses maintain the façade that the perpetrator is innocent, and that the victim’s responses were unreasonable. By downplaying their actions, perpetrators often exaggerated the victims’ reactions, tarnishing the victim’s reputation outside the relationship. Respondents described not being believed by friends and family, as perpetrators convincingly portrayed the victim as unreliable or untrustworthy. These image control tactics contributed to the perpetrator’s distortion of reality both for the victim and external support systems.

Gradual Progression of Behaviours

Respondents described distinct patterns in how gaslighting progressed in their relationships, particularly in timing and intensity. A consistent factor amplifying its impact was repetition, “*Repetition by the perpetrator either through the length of time it has been occurring or the lie itself is repeated*” (P28), which wore victims down, increased confusion and made resistance harder. Timing varied, as some experienced constant gaslighting with unwavering challenges from the perpetrator, e.g., “*A perpetrator’s unwavering stance while the victim is constantly trying to figure out things*” (P59); others experienced intermittent gaslighting alternating with acts of affection, causing similar confusion, “*we both believed that I caused the abuse and the love bombing man who behaved well in public was the real deal*” (P184).

Gaslighting was often a ‘gradual process’. Early behaviours were subtle, e.g. “*don’t go on the tram it’s dangerous in that direction, stay local for ‘safety’*” (P189), but later recognised as controlling behaviours undermining autonomy. Over time it intensified, “*He made me believe that he was concerned about me, my well-being, that I was ‘overthinking things’, and then in the latter stages, blatantly accusatory... ‘you’re crazy’ or ‘you need to see someone’*” (P195). This slow progression made it harder to identify as abuse, “*If they were like this in the start you would have left them*” (V109). A few reported bold gaslighting early on, which

worsened over time. Gradual progression and repetition of gaslighting were common, though escalation intensity varied.

Targeting the Victim's Support Network

Respondents noted that perpetrators targeted their support networks, either by isolating them from external support or involving support systems in the gaslighting. Typically, perpetrators undermined victim's relationships with friends, family, or colleagues by demanding the victim's time, creating discord (e.g., "*he doesn't even like you*" P204), or even relocating the victim to another state or country. This detachment from their support network meant there were often no witnesses to the abuse, and no outside perspectives to challenge the perpetrator or to validate the victim.

Additionally, perpetrators destabilised the support network by involving it in their gaslighting efforts. Some respondents shared how perpetrators ingratiated themselves with friends and family, resulting in resistance when victims attempted to express concerns about the perpetrators' actions, "*it is very hard for people who have met him to believe that he is capable of the things he has done*" (P127). Further, this allowed perpetrators to sow doubt about the victim's credibility, securing support for their viewpoint. There are also instances in which respondents reported that multiple individuals within their network actively participated in the gaslighting. This occurred through a variety of ways, such as the perpetrator coercing the victims' network into participating (P53), or in instances where the victim is friends/family with people close to the perpetrator (P40). While these tactics ranged from subtle to overt, they all functioned to reinforce the gaslighting narrative and weakened the victim's support system.

Using Other Forms of Abuse

Respondents described a wide variety of abusive behaviours enacted by the perpetrator alongside the gaslighting, including psychological, physical, sexual abuse, and coercive control. The distinction between gaslighting and other forms of abuse often blurred, especially

in cases of emotional abuse where respondents faced insults, invalidation, and accusations. Respondents noted that using multiple forms of abuse alongside gaslighting was intentional, reinforcing the gaslighting effect. Many felt overwhelmed and exhausted from the cumulative impact of various abuses, stating “*The financial control and lying and denying it coupled with other strategies like sleep deprivation, constantly needing help with problems they create leaves you mentally and physically exhausted and with no energy left to fight the gaslighting*” (P191). Respondents also described feeling coerced into accepting the gaslighting due to fear of consequences.

Importantly, the relationship between gaslighting and abuse goes in both directions. Some respondents indicated that perpetrators used gaslighting to obscure other forms of abuse, denying responsibility and attempting to make victims accept that the abuse was ‘normal, or not their fault. As one respondent put it, “*reframing abuse to scramble the victim’s memory, creating new dramas when abuser is called out clearly*” (P96).

Perpetrator History

Respondents noted that a perpetrator’s behavioural history can influence gaslighting dynamics. Perpetrators may be more likely to engage in gaslighting if they have previously employed gaslighting or similar behaviours in past relationships, “*people who have a history of lying or manipulating the truth and a lack of ability to accountability for their own actions*” (P05). Additionally, some perpetrators may have a background of abuse where healthy expression was discouraged, or they have experienced gaslighting themselves. This prior experience may make them more willing to use gaslighting in current relationships. While this may not always be the case, respondents noted that perpetrators’ behavioural history can impact their likelihood of engaging in gaslighting with their partners.

Victim

Categories emerged relevant to the victim that influenced their experience of gaslighting within the relationship. These included: (a) access to support and resources, (b) protective strategies, (c) safety, and (d) the victim's history of abuse.

Access to Support and Resources

Mirroring the perpetrator's strategy of targeting and isolating victims from their support network, access to support and resources significantly influenced respondents' descriptions of factors that amplified or protected against gaslighting.

Access to support

Respondents reported access to support as a protective factor, including having a strong network of family or friends who could offer support and separation from the perpetrator, *“when a victim has access to trusted support networks whereby the perpetrator's actions can be challenged with discussion, reflection”* (P103). This social support can extend beyond immediate friends and family, to neighbours, local community, and workplaces. One respondent highlighted how employment outside the home provided exposure to different perspectives *“frequent social contact with others, being employed away from home – anything that is more likely to introduce external factors that may make the victim less likely to just except [sic] what the perpetrator says”* (P173). Maintaining relationships with those not influenced by the perpetrator and accessing spaces to challenge gaslighting narratives are crucial for reducing its impact.

Access to resources

Access to information and resources was important for victims, often playing a pivotal role in recognising gaslighting. Respondents noted that increased exposure to educational materials on identifying this form of abuse, and available support services had a significant inhibitory effect. One respondent highlighted the need for early education on gaslighting,

stating *“I did not recognise it. I thought it was right and deserved”* (P184). Family and friends could also better support victims by having access to readily available information about gaslighting and its impact, which could aid in recognition and reduce harmful community reinforcement. One respondent suggested, *“It would be great for a ‘bystander’ (friends and family) resource on how to not contribute to gaslighting when the person you love is doing the gaslighting”* (P42).

Resources included victim access to support services such as social services, legal aid, counselling and helplines. Respondents shared positive experiences where these services helped them identify the abuse, such as *“Affected being made aware of losing their identity by counsellors instead of [...] combined counselling with your partner”* (P189). However, many respondents also recounted negative encounters with support services that reinforced the gaslighting. One noted, *“The court system is now doing it for him. He’s paying hundreds and thousands of dollars for a lawyer to twist and lie for him, the male ICL (Independent Children’s Lawyer) has ignored all evidence of my and the children’s abuse, saying, ‘if it was serious she would have reported it”* (P09). Instances where authorities such as police, therapists, doctors, and courts favoured the perpetrator over the victim were frequently cited. Despite the potential benefits of access to support and resources, respondents emphasised access to supportive and knowledgeable services was not always guaranteed.

Protective Strategies

When asked about factors that mitigate the impacts of gaslighting, respondents described various self-protection strategies. One key tactic included documenting events or keeping a daily journal, which helped track conversations and provided evidence of abuse *“every action of the perpetrator is documented with dates and times, so you have proof that things have actually occurred”* (P77). Respondents sometimes used this information to demonstrate to family and friends what was happening or as evidence for law enforcement.

Another protective strategy involved not engaging with the gaslighting narrative. Respondents employed tactics such as not arguing and only providing “*short answers*” (P164), avoiding emotional engagement, referred to as “*grey rocking*” (P253), or removing themselves from the conversation. While these strategies helped some mitigate the effects of gaslighting, they were not effective in isolation. Respondents emphasised the importance of combining these tactics with a strong support system. There were also instances where these tactics backfired. One respondent noted that documented evidence often led to escalation from the perpetrator as they would “*move on to the next gaslighting/illogical thing to try to deflect*” (P177). Another mentioned that calling out inconsistencies could result in further abuse and stated that “*the only way to reduce gaslighting is to not have any contact with the perpetrator*” (P140).

Respondents also highlighted the role of empowered mindsets as a protective mechanism. Placing priority on the self rather than the relationship can help individuals resist gaslighting attempts. Some respondents noted that those with high self-confidence and self-worth may feel better equipped to challenge the perpetrator or leave the relationship. As one noted, “*A victim with strong self-worth and personal boundaries who is able to see the manipulation for what it is and not enter into the interactions, but remove themselves from the situation*” (P78). However, many noted that consistent gaslighting erodes a victim’s self-image over time, “*I don’t think there is much you can do because you don’t see it coming they build up over time. It becomes imbedded in the way your mind thinks*” (P110). Therefore, while confidence and self-esteem may inoculate against gaslighting initially, these qualities may require other avenues of victim empowerment to endure.

Safety

Respondents emphasised that their safety and stability, including both physical and mental wellbeing, significantly affected their ability to confront gaslighting. Physical safety

was at risk when perpetrators resorted to or threatened violence, often exploiting vulnerabilities like disabilities or financial dependency. For example, some respondents felt unable to leave due to concerns over financial or housing security, *“Being stopped from re-entering the workforce after children to be dependent financially and trapped without a career to earn enough to support the children”* (P76). This lack of financial security pressured victims to tolerate gaslighting narratives. Additionally, respondents noted how perpetrators undermined their mental wellbeing. Factors such as heightened stress, health conditions, exhaustion, and feelings of helplessness made it harder to challenge the gaslighting. Many described the toll as leaving them *“mentally and physically exhausted and with no energy left to fight the gaslighting”* (P191).

History

Respondent’s described past experiences of abuse as having a complex relationship with the recognition of gaslighting. Some indicated that prior experience of abuse increased vulnerability towards gaslighting, noting that *“the victim has had a history of similar relationships in the past, probably growing up in an environment where their own needs and wants were not listened to/heard”* (P78). Witnessing, or experiencing abuse was described as normalising the abusive patterns underlying gaslighting. Conversely, respondents also highlighted that experiences of healthy relationships can help de-normalise gaslighting behaviours. Witnessing or experiencing positive dynamics might enable individuals to recognise manipulative behaviour as out of place. As one respondent noted, *“a good support network and a healthy upbringing, so that you are familiar when to set boundaries and take appropriate action”* (P108).

While many noted that prior relationships could normalise expectations in future dynamics, some argued that a history of abuse could better equip victims to recognise gaslighting in new relationships, for instance *“If the victim has already experienced*

gaslighting, can tell the signs and knows how to get out of that situation” (P190). Conversely, victims without prior relationship experience were seen as more vulnerable, “*gaslighter chooses innocent person without experience of other relationships to manipulate to gain power and control over a person”* (P189). Thus, both exposure to prior abusive and healthy relationships influence vulnerability to gaslighting, depending on normalisation and awareness of abuse.

Relationship Dynamics

Respondents described relational dynamics between the perpetrator and victim that impacted the experience of gaslighting, including: (a) power imbalance within the relationship, and (b) intimacy and trust between the perpetrator and victim.

Power Imbalance Between Partners

A key factor that emerged in respondents’ descriptions of gaslighting dynamics is the power imbalance that exists between partners. Perpetrators were often described as having power over their partner, either through leverage, or inequality within the relationship. Leverage was noted when perpetrators had control over essential aspects of the victim’s safety and security. This often manifested in situations where victims relied on perpetrators for financial or housing security, shared children, or in contexts where they lacked external support, such as living in a new country. One respondent highlighted how this leverage forced their agreement, “*And by the end I was just trying to protect my kids, it was easier to just stop questioning so my kids didn't end up being hurt”* (P127). Inequality within the relationship also played a role. While inequality could be direct, such as parent-child dynamics, it was frequently described in more subtle ways such as difference in social status, education, income, physical size, or age. Power exertion could be overt, with clear attempts to force agreement, or more subtle, as illustrated by one respondent who noted that, “[the perpetrator] *happens to be 6 foot*

6 and is quite physically intimidating to most people. Even without being aggressive or abusive or manipulative” (P17).

Intimacy and Trust Between the Perpetrator and Victim

Respondents described that intimacy, and trust can facilitate the gaslighting dynamic. Respondents of this survey experienced gaslighting within close relationships, making trust a critical factor influencing responses to the perpetrators’ manipulations. Perpetrators often relied on this trust, using it to introduce deception into the relationship. Respondents described extending respect and empathy towards their partner, giving them the benefit of the doubt, as expressed by one respondent, “[the] victim wants to believe in and trust the perpetrator” (P106). This trust not only enables the manipulation of victims, but also granted perpetrators access to intimate information that could be weaponised against the victim “I think instances where the perpetrator knows their victim well enables them to target specific vulnerabilities” (P63).

Role of the Environment

Respondents described environmental factors, including (a) gender roles within and outside of the relationship, (b) community values and responses, and (c) the varying impact of different social settings.

Gender Roles

Respondents identified gendered expectations and patriarchal values as facilitators of gaslighting in relationships. Women felt pressured by community and cultural expectations to tolerate abusive behaviour and be forgiving and empathetic. For instance, “[Gaslighting was facilitated by] society’s expectation of women and marriage, that women should be kind and compromising” (P184). Respondents mentioned that women were encouraged to forgive their husbands, as long as they apologised, since ‘it is the wife’s job to forgive’ (P184). Additionally, societal values around marriage, such as ‘marriage is for life,’ remaining ‘loyal,’ and

compromising to ‘fix’ the relationship, reinforced pressure on women to stay in abusive relationships (P184; P84). These gendered attitudes left some respondents feeling obligated to forgive and seek resolution with manipulative and abusive partners.

Conversely, gendered expectations of men enabled them to exert power over their partners and use psychological and physical abuse. Some respondents noted that societal beliefs, such as the idea that men are justified in controlling their wives, made it harder for women to seek support for covert abuse. One respondent explained, “*men’s need for power and control is accepted by society at large, so nobody questions some of their behaviours*” (P154). This social normalisation of men ‘taking control’ of their partners can reinforce harmful narratives inherent to gaslighting, like “*the abuser believing they are a good man and that you need to be controlled for your own good*” (P184). Furthermore, respondents observed a normalisation of masculine violence within their communities, where physical intimidation was common. For example, one respondent recalled, “[I heard] *comments from his friends that they were forced to punch holes in walls because the wives made them angry*” (P184). This acceptance of violent behaviour further reflected patriarchal values, pressuring women to maintain and mend relationships despite abusive circumstances.

Reinforcement Through Communities

Community values, awareness, and responses to gaslighting emerged as important factors moderating its impact on respondents. The lack of community education on psychological abuse and patterns, made it hard for some respondents to be taken seriously. Respondents noted cultural attitudes that trivialised or excused gaslighting such as, “*If I mentioned my concerns to friends/family, they saw a tiny snapshot that could be explained away (‘Maybe you do remember incorrectly’, ‘That’s such a small issue, don’t make it a big deal’, ‘Why are you worried about a small misunderstanding?’)*” (P127). Further, cultural

narratives like “*romantic relationships mean you are worthy*”, or “*love conquers all*”, pressured respondents to stay within these relationships (P84).

Respondents emphasised the need for better community education on healthy and unhealthy relationships behaviours, and increased awareness of abuse signs and patterns. They described positive experiences where community awareness of gaslighting helped them gain support, “*I was scared of engaging with social services because I was convinced that they would believe my abuser because of his qualifications as a doctor. In reality they saw the situation for what it was*” (P40). Further, respondents called for a shift in cultural narratives that encourage victim blaming, to ones emphasising perpetrator accountability, “[we need] *common language that defines subtle and overt gaslighting behaviours and perpetrators as holding all responsibility for harms caused*” (P182). While acknowledging that social accountability might not have prevented perpetrator behaviour, respondents note it would help victims validate their experiences and seek support.

Varying Impact of Gaslighting in Different Social Settings

Respondents described a complex relationship between the social settings of gaslighting and its severity. Many emphasised that gaslighting was most effective in private. As one noted, “*usually gaslighting is done when there is no one to witness it or if there are witnesses it is done in code way that only the victim and perpetrator understand*” (P140). Despite gaslighting primarily occurring behind closed doors, respondents highlighted the potential role of witnesses in preventing and addressing it, “*when there are witnesses to the subject/context/patterns of behaviours, people who believe you and support you*” (P123). Witnesses may deter the gaslighter or provide an opportunity for intervention.

While most respondents agreed that witnesses could help inhibit gaslighting, some observed their presence could make it more difficult to challenge the perpetrator, “*In my experience, the gaslighting was a lot more effective around others because you weren't able to*

challenge it in front of people” (P204). The presence of witnesses can also have a facilitatory impact, depending on their actions. For instance, some witnesses unintentionally reinforced the gaslighting by acting as passive bystanders, *“I remember my family witnessing a few incidents themselves, and them not really believing what they were seeing? Perhaps thinking: “That’s so bizarre, perhaps I have the wrong idea”* (P127).

Victim Outcomes

Respondents described broad outcomes of gaslighting on victim wellbeing, spanning the following domains: (a) cognitive, (b) behavioural, (c) emotional, (d) physical, (e) social, (f) resource security. Further, respondents identified (g) ongoing impacts after the relationship has ended.

Cognitive Impacts

Respondents described cognitive impacts of gaslighting, including changed perceptions of reality and self.

Changes to perception of reality and self

Gaslighting was described as affecting the victims' cognitions by distorting their ability to perceive and interpret reality. This impact extended to memory, emotion, judgment, and even basic tasks, as one respondent shared, *“[the gaslighting] made me question everything! Did I lock the car? Is the stove off? Did I lock the house? Is the heater off?”* (P68). Respondents struggled with trusting their own judgment or memory long after the relationship ended, with one noting *“[I keep] needing to check in with people (friends, colleagues) that I am remembering, or understood something correctly because of doubts that persist (even years later)”* (P84). This shift in perception also affected their sense of identity and role within the relationship. As one respondent expressed, *“I’ve been made to feel like I’m crazy, an insufficient partner, friend and mother. Second guessing if I was actually the victim or perpetrator”* (P59). A common impact was the false belief that they had ‘gone crazy’, with respondents describing

distress over being made to feel they had developed a mental health condition, “*I ended up thinking I was completely crazy because my thoughts didn't match what I was being told*” (P21).

Gaslighting also damaged respondents’ beliefs about themselves and their worth. Some described being conditioned to expect abuse or feel undeserving of love and respect. As one noted, “*I fight every single day to prove I am worth something, I am worth love, and my love for others is worth something, even if that voice in my head tells me I’m wrong*” (P117). The gaslighting severely impacted their self-trust and self-esteem, as one respondent noted, “*It has reduced my feeling of safety/trust in myself as it has made me doubt myself. This effected [sic] my self-esteem which in turn made me more reluctant to try new things, socialise with others etc*” (P89). The gaslighting-induced shift in self-perception stripped victims of their identity and autonomy, leaving them dependent on others for confirmation, with one respondent explaining “*I lost my self-esteem and self-worth in the home and was unable to make simple decisions*” (P46).

Behavioural Impacts

Respondents identified behavioural impacts of gaslighting on victims, including changes to outward personality, loss of autonomy, and reluctance to engage with authorities.

Personality changes

Respondents noted that gaslighting often led to a noticeable shift in the victim’s outward personality. Some described withholding or altering their reactions, becoming increasingly apologetic and engaging in people-pleasing behaviours. One respondent shared, “*I am so accustomed to walking on eggshells, everything being my fault, trying to keep the peace, trying to avoid even the slightest potential conflict. I am so convinced that it is me who is the problem, that it is me who is the cause of everything that happened, that I apologise for everything*” (P117). Some also mentioned becoming uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn.

As one respondent described, *“I became the total opposite to who I was, tried to keep the peace, stayed quiet never told anybody until too late, you take less care of yourself, have a don't care attitude which I am trying to stop and get back to who I was”* (P81).

Loss of autonomy

Respondents noted that gaslighting led to a loss of autonomy, manifesting in several ways. The first was through direct control by their partner, where victims felt that every action could be questioned or challenged. As one respondent described, *“[The gaslighting] hindered my ability to feel like I was “allowed” to leave the house for work, exercise or socialising”* (P28). It was also common for respondents to struggle with decision-making or setting boundaries due to constant challenges from their partner. As one noted, *“I constantly second guess my own ability to make decisions. I doubt whether I might know something, I doubt that my input could ever be of value, I doubt that I could be anything but a burden on anybody, because that’s what I’ve been told for so many years”* (P117). Further, some felt trapped in their relationships, unable to leave due to the manipulation, *“he threatened to take my child off me and tell others I was crazy and then called the police that I was threatening to harm him”* (P140).

Reluctance to engage with authorities

Many respondents described having negative experiences with authorities that were meant to protect victims, such as the police or legal institutions. They shared instances where they sought help but were dismissed, disbelieved, or even perceived as the perpetrator. One respondent recalled, *“I dealt with the system and was considered the perpetrator following presenting myself to the police”* (P97). Due to direct experiences or the reputation of these institutions, many avoided seeking help out of fear they wouldn’t be understood or assisted. As one respondent described, *“managing and navigating a gaslighting abuser within a*

flawed/corrupt/dangerous legal system, is a full-time job. It has destroyed my trust in professionals (who have failed to recognise it)” (P102).

Even those who successfully reported their abuse noted that gaslighting often worsened, with perpetrators using the legal context as a tool for further gaslighting, *“He texts me threatening things like, ‘I’m sure you’ll hear from your lawyer tomorrow’ or ‘you’re lying to legal aid, the lawyers are on it’, which leaves me in a constant state of anxiety” (P09).* This real or anticipated mistreatment and lack of protection from continued gaslighting left many respondents reluctant to report their abuse.

Emotional Impacts

Respondents described emotional impacts, including direct, indirect, or anticipatory negative reactions to gaslighting, as well as the development or worsening of mental health symptoms.

Direct emotional impacts

The emotional impacts of gaslighting were extensive and varied among respondents. All experienced negative impacts, such as anger, grief, helplessness, shame, or loneliness. One respondent highlighted the deep emotional toll, stating, *“The gaslighting has affected me more than the physical violence as it is so much more pervasive and harder to see. I gradually lost my confidence, self-esteem, sense of humour, joy of life, became anxious and tearful and had to give up my job as I am a health professional and could no longer give to others as I was such a mess” (P184).* Many respondents described growing mistrust of their emotional responses and reluctance to express their feelings, as perpetrators had made them view their reactions as invalid *“[the gaslighting] has made me feel that I cannot ever get emotional about anything because I’m overreacting, and my feelings are never valid which has led to me seeking validation for most experiences” (P70).*

Indirect and anticipatory emotional impacts

Many respondents described indirect emotional impacts of gaslighting that extended into their social interactions beyond the immediate relationship. Some became highly sensitive to phrases or cues commonly used in gaslighting. For instance, respondents noted heightened sensitivity to being challenged or disbelieved by others, *“I do have a big hang up now about not being believed. Even for small things (i.e. me telling the mechanic my car's air-con has an intermittent fault, and then being told they couldn't find an issue so I must be mistaken – really upset me more than it previously would have)”* (P127). Additionally, some respondents struggled with anticipating negative emotional consequences when trusting others. One described feeling hypervigilant and fearful of their new partner’s true intentions after leaving their abuser, *“I am in a new relationship, but find it hard to trust him or myself, still wondering if I am mad and not allowing myself to question behaviour because of it”* (P77).

New or worsening mental health symptoms

Respondents reported various mental health effects from ongoing gaslighting, including brain fog, difficulty concentrating, nightmares, severe stress, and panic attacks. For example, one noted, *“I would have a full-blown panic attack at least twice a month for 3 years straight from an argument that always included gaslighting”* (P204). These impacts were common, with some noting that repeated exposure led to the development, or worsening of anxiety and depression, *“It caused me to become depressed, paranoid. I didn’t know who I could trust. Vulnerable. Eventually led to me attempting suicide”* (P61).

Physical Impacts

Respondents described physical impacts of gaslighting, including exhaustion and new or worsening physical health conditions.

Exhaustion from relationship stressors

A common described physical impact of ongoing gaslighting was exhaustion and chronic fatigue. Respondents reported that continuous challenges and stress from their partner left them drained. One described, *“I was exhausted and powerless. My husband became stronger and more controlling. Even when I thought he may be wrong, I gave up earlier with no fight - dejected and retreated into myself. I remember being tired and lethargic”* (P103). The relentless abuse prevented respondents from resting, as one explained, *“the never-ending loop of vile putdowns that prevent my brain from switching off”* (P117).

New and worsening physical health conditions

Many respondents reported developing or worsening physical health conditions due to the stress from ongoing gaslighting. Examples included hair loss, skin conditions, chronic pain, insomnia, weight fluctuations, and gastrointestinal issues. One respondent shared, *“I have a long list of ailments that started while in that relationship, gynaecological, digestive, thyroid and joint. Being in constant state of sleep deprivation and heightened stress broke me”* (P191). Additionally, some respondents shared that the physical impacts were exacerbated by the perpetrator’s financial control, as *“immediate appropriate care was denied to me”* (P191). The direct and indirect physical effects of gaslighting described were extensive and could be exacerbated by the isolation and control imposed by the perpetrator.

Social Impacts

Respondents described social impacts including shifts in relationships with support networks, withdrawal from others, negative impacts on those close to the victim, and difficulties in forming new relationships after the gaslighting ended.

Change to the nature of relationship with support network

Respondents reported shifts in their relationships, both with the perpetrator and their broader social network. All respondents indicated a loss of trust in the perpetrator, with one

noting “[The gaslighting] *ensured I can never trust a word the perpetrator says, destroyed the (previously perceived) beautiful illusion of my future life with the perpetrator*” (P122). The impacts on the respondents’ broader social networks were more varied. As a result of the behaviour discussed in the perpetrator ‘targeting support network’ category, many victims reported losing relationships with friends and family due to loss of trust, or from being isolated. However, some found that certain friendships grew stronger, as one respondent expressed, “*Socially, I lost friends who didn't explore my experience and minimised my experience or believed my ex-husband. Then, there were the handful of friends that saw me being gaslighted and these friendships have deepened and I'm so amazed how supported and valued I now feel. An unexpected outcome*” (P103).

Isolation and withdrawal

Many respondents experienced isolation either due to the perpetrator’s actions or through withdrawal. Some respondents were isolated when the perpetrator prevented access to their friends and family or undermined their trust in them. One shared “[the gaslighter] *completely destroyed some relationships as he would completely run down friends and had me believing that they were not good people and I should know better than having friends like that...they were, are very decent people that I have managed to reconnect with but years later it's not the same*” (P191). Others were isolated by their friends and family when they sided with the perpetrator, blamed the victim for the relationship’s dysfunction, or participated in the gaslighting. One respondent recounted, “*He launched a smear campaign in my small hometown that resulted in me getting death threats, being tailgated and having people look through the windows of my house.*” (P33). Even after the relationship ended, the effects of isolation often persisted, “*No mutual friends believed me when I spoke out and left as they'd all been lied to for years*” (P09).

Withdrawal also played a role in isolation, as many respondents described retreating into themselves due to fear of social judgment, exhaustion, or being placed in a position where they would have to defend the perpetrator. One respondent shared, *“I went from being quite confident socially to being very awkward as I had no idea what lies he was telling everyone about me”* (P09). Respondents also reported feeling drained after leaving, which made maintaining relationships difficult *“I have very minimal friends now and do not even have the energy to spend time with family”* (P172).

Adverse impacts of gaslighting on social networks

The effects of gaslighting extended beyond the victims, with respondents noting its negative emotional impact on their friends and family (P150; P205). Common concerns included loved ones experiencing stress, fear, and worry for the victim. One respondent described, *“Gaslighting tricked me into believing it wasn't abuse. This in turn affects my entire family who have been affected and stood witness and been hurt”* (P101). However, respondents were particularly worried about impact on their children. Many reported concerns about their children growing up in an abusive environment, with one respondent explaining, *“She is now 14 with serious mental health issues [...] he is mainly absent from her life since her symptoms became obvious, and he rejected her and told her to move in with me full time after years of 50-50 care”* (P76). Respondents also feared their children would model unhealthy relationship dynamics, with one stating, *“I need to show them what a healthy relationship looks like, but how can I do that when I've never experienced that myself?”* (P117).

Difficulties with creating new relationships

A common social dilemma among respondents was the difficulty in forming new relationships after leaving the perpetrator. The deception underlying gaslighting made it hard for many to trust the intentions of new people. For some, this distrust turned building and maintaining relationships into a challenging process, *“I fight hard against the instinct to have*

a universal distrust for everyone new I meet and fight the doubt that creeps in on those I already do” (P117). Others found their fear and distrust completely prevented them from trying to start new relationships, “I am wary of everyone.... I am fearful that people I meet are not genuine so I avoid making close connections, just in case” (P124).

Resource Insecurity

Respondents identified the direct and indirect impacts of gaslighting on resource security, including loss of income and the cost of rebuilding their lives after the relationship.

Loss of income

Respondents noted various ways gaslighting affected their ability to work and maintain a steady income. Chronic fatigue had far-reaching effects, impairing some respondents’ capacity to gain and sustain employment. One explained, *“years of trauma has led to chronic fatigue, and I am unable to work more than 15 hours per week. I can’t afford to pay for any help beyond my living expenses” (P24).* Additionally, the perpetrator’s gaslighting diminished some respondent’s self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to succeed in the workforce. For example, one respondent shared, *“I left the job believing I had dementia and unable to support my young son who I was responsible for. I applied for many jobs in the following months (such as cleaning work as I believed I was handicapped) that I never heard back from – this led to a suicide attempt and hospitalisation where I was informed that I was in fact capable of working” (P83).*

Financial cost of rebuilding

In addition to losing income, many respondents faced increased expenses related to engaging with legal, medical, and mental health institutions. They identified significant financial burden from legal proceedings, therapy, and medical costs stemming from ongoing abuse. One respondent noted, *“I’ve had to take countless hours off from work. On top of being required physically in court, I’ve had to attend solicitor’s appointments and countless*

psychologist appointments and counselling sessions, which are essential for my mental health” (P117). Many respondents also had significant investments with their partners, leading to financial impacts of ending the relationship, such as loss of housing, relocation, and single parenting costs. One respondent recounted, *“I was dragged through court and 190k later the kids and I were safe, 6 mth after divorce he was married and stopped seeing the kids”* (P105).

Duration of Impact

The cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, and physical impacts of gaslighting, noted earlier, lasts well beyond the relationship itself. Respondents described experiencing grief over these deep and ongoing impacts, emphasising that recovery takes significant time and effort. One observed, *“I think you feel like if you get away from the person you will be fine, but the trauma is very real and deep from this kind of abuse. It’s a lot of hard work putting yourself back together”* (P88). While respondents were at different stages of recovery and held varying confidence in the likelihood of healing, it is important to recognise the substantial time lost to recovering from gaslighting. As one shared, *“I am in a better place now but I’ve lost most of my life trying to figure this out”* (P24).

Support Service Provider Perspectives

Service providers shared perspectives on the dynamics and outcomes of gaslighting that closely mirror the victim-survivor responses, with no new major categories emerging. However, there were some minor differences in sub-categories, and varying emphasis, which will be discussed below.

Perpetrator

All perpetrator categories and sub-categories in the model appeared in the service provider responses, with no new categories emerging. Service providers emphasised reversing blame, avoiding accountability, and minimising behaviours. One respondent noted, *“Usually the perp [sic] takes no responsibility for their actions as long as they are in control. Then when*

they feel they are losing control they then switch it up, making the victim feel no matter what they do they will always feel like they can't win" (P03). There was also a focus on the instability of the perpetrator's responses, and its effect on the victim, as described by another respondent, *"The dynamic is typically held in place by alternating between love/abuse; affection/withdrawal of affection; validation/invalidation; building up with resources/withdrawal of resources"* (P12).

Victim

All victim categories and sub-categories in the model appeared in service provider responses, and no new victim-specific categories emerged. Service providers emphasised the crucial role of a strong support network and access to educational resources or support services. They also highlighted the safety and vulnerability of victims as barriers to accessing these services. One respondent noted, *"Perpetrators deliberately use vulnerabilities against victims and to make it difficult for them to seek support"* (P16).

Relationship Dynamics

All relationship dynamic categories and sub-categories appeared in the service provider responses. Service providers offered additional insights into the dynamics between the victim and perpetrator, expanding on the internal dynamics described by victims. One identified dynamic was how perpetrators communicate with, or about the victim in the presence of others. Service providers noted that perpetrators often speak on behalf of the victim, dominate conversations, or simultaneously elevate themselves while belittling the victim. One service provider remarked, *"[gaslighting is visible in] the nature of their interaction - how they speak to one another. Again, is one person more subservient to the other, does one person make jokes at the other person's expense"* (P16). Victims, on the other hand, were observed to show warning signs, such as constant apologising, deferring to the perpetrator for decisions, downplaying themselves, or making excuses for the perpetrator. As one service provider

shared, *“Their verbal language and body language; unable to make decisions without confidence, thinking and feeling not good enough by partners, always doubting themselves”* (P03).

Role of the Environment

All environment categories and sub-categories appeared in the service provider responses, with no new categories emerging. Service providers emphasised the need for cultural change, and increased community education, particularly regarding perpetrator accountability, and the recognition of psychological abuse in relationships. For example, one service provider highlighted the importance of public and professional awareness of *“the insidious scope and breadth of perpetrator tactics – the lengths many perpetrators will go to maintain their position”* (P12). Service providers noted that community attitudes can significantly affect how victims are treated in workplaces, Family Courts, and professional services. One respondent pointed out that support services often fail victims by not recognising gaslighting behaviours as abusive or framing it as merely a troublesome relationship dynamic rather than ‘a set of controlling behaviours by the perpetrator’ (P12). One respondent noted, *“family court needs a massive overhaul where they understand the depths of domestic violence and reduce access to children for dangerous abusive men”* (P06).

Victim Outcomes

All victim outcome categories, and most sub-categories, appeared in the service provider responses. However, a sub-category regarding the difficulty in creating new relationships was absent, as the focus was primarily on the victim’s existing relationship with the perpetrator. One additional outcome emphasised by service providers was that gaslighting can impact on the victim’s presentation to authorities. One service provider noted *“victims become very distressed, then don’t present well to police, courts, generally so look like the “crazy” person the perpetrator has described”* (P06).

Discussion

Given the limited empirical research into the factors involved in gaslighting, establishing a model based on victim-survivor and service provider experiences offers an important foundation for future research and practice. This survey revealed a wide range of perpetrator, victim, relational, and environmental factors that influence gaslighting. Key findings of this study will be discussed in relation to existing literature and how it may influence IPV policy, legislation, or practice.

There Are Identifiable Patterns of Behaviour and Tactics Used by Gaslighters

Identifying patterns of behaviour is crucial for informing policy and legislation, as it enables the development of clear, standardised criteria for recognising and addressing gaslighting in IPV cases. While some tactics used in gaslighting overlap with behaviours found in other forms of IPV or in offender personality profiles such as the Dark Triad (March et al., 2023), our model distinguishes gaslighting by its sustained and targeted use of these tactics to erode a victim's trust in their own perceptions and sense of reality. Hamilton's (1939) titular play 'Gas Light' depicted behaviours now synonymous with the term 'gaslighting', such as manipulating the environment, lying, and making victims doubt their perceptions or fear that they are 'going mad'. Over time, literature has expanded this phenomenon to include a variety of tactics ranging from being deliberately vague to weaponising anger (Simon, 2010), all aimed at the broader goal of controlling the victim's reality (e.g., Sweet, 2019). Similarly, the current study has identified a range of perpetrator tactics, however, these tactics fall under broader categories of behaviour and function. Although individual tactics may resemble features of broader emotional abuse or coercive control, it is the way these behaviours interact over time, (i.e., deception, invalidation, isolation and narrative control) that collectively undermines the victim's self-trust and perception of reality. This pattern is what distinguishes gaslighting from other forms of psychological abuse, as described in Chapter 2.

Distortion of reality is a hallmark of gaslighting, involving tactics that make victims question their own experiences. A key method is deception, where perpetrators manipulate the environment, or deny and fabricate information to support their version of events and undermine the victim's perceptions. These strategies create uncertainty and discomfort, which the perpetrator reinforces by dismissing the victim's perspective, often attributing any disagreement to the victim's own shortcomings, such as claiming 'you do not have the best memory'. This invalidation can escalate into accusations, portraying the victim as unreliable and incapable of thought due to perceived cognitive flaws. Such manipulative behaviours are core to established models of gaslighting (e.g., Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022; Klein, et al., 2023), as well as in the current one. Particularly, attempts to undermine the victim's reliability have been argued as a key distinction between gaslighting and simple deception (Li & Samp, 2023). However, respondents in the current study also identified additional behaviours that contribute to reality distortion beyond lying and invalidating the victim's views.

The content of the narratives presented by perpetrators played an important role in reality distortion. While Stern (2007) described clear typologies of gaslighting perpetrators in her self-help book, such as 'good guy', 'glamour', and 'intimidator', this current study found no evidence supporting these specific typologies. Instead, respondents reported that perpetrators commonly portrayed themselves as the victim's saviour, an authority figure, or most frequently, the victim. The 'playing the victim' strategy is not new, as it has been widely recognised in abusive relationships, notably in the DARVO emotional abuse tactic (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender) (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). This tendency to reverse blame aligns with criminological theories explaining how perpetrators justify harmful behaviours. For example, Techniques of Neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and Moral Disengagement (Bandura, 1999) describe how individuals avoid responsibility to protect their self-image. Similarly, Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) posits perpetrators reduce

discomfort from their harmful actions by shifting blame. It is, therefore, unsurprising that these self-exculpatory narratives occurred frequently in gaslighting abuse, as perpetrators deflect blame onto the victims, made counteraccusations to depict the victim as equally culpable, or provoked arguments to portray the victim as unstable. Further, it was described that gaslighters often presented themselves as a victim to authorities, a common strategy used by perpetrators of coercive control (Nancarrow et al., 2020).

A lesser explored component of gaslighting is the pattern and progression of behaviours within the relationships. While some reviews suggest that gaslighting tends to be repetitive (Abrahamson, 2014), and recent models support this (Hailes, 2022), little research has explored how these patterns evolve over time. Klein, et al. (2023) addressed this by investigating the development of gaslighting behaviours before and during relationships, observing that many relationships began with ‘love bombing’, where perpetrators use excessive attention and flattery to manipulate the victim (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2024). As in prior models, the current study supports the idea that gaslighting is a repeated behaviour that can evolve throughout a relationship, and there was support for both consistent and intermittent schedules of gaslighting. Some participants reported it as a constant script between partners, whereas others reported it occurred sporadically and could be used intermittently with extreme affection. Gaslighting was typically described as progressing gradually, a description also common in self-help literature (e.g., Stern, 2007; Sarkis, 2018), however some people did experience bold attempts early in the relationship.

While gaslighting’s repetitive and progressive nature is characteristic of this abuse, its intensity and timing may vary based on other factors in the relationship. However, when discussing the progression of gaslighting behaviours, it is important to acknowledge the potential for escalation into more severe forms of IPV, including domestic homicide. Coercive control, often intertwined with gaslighting, has been identified as a critical risk factor, present

in 99% of domestic homicide cases in Australia between 2017 and 2019 (DVDR, 2020; Boxall & Morgan, 2021). Although research specifically tracking the escalation of gaslighting is limited, evidence on coercive control indicates that such patterns can be instrumental in the lead-up to more severe, and sometimes fatal, violence.

Another key tactic identified in this study was isolating the victim from their support networks, a behaviour common in both gaslighting and broader IPV (Veldhuis, 2024). The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review reported that 63.2% of the perpetrators in 212 IPV homicides between 2010 and 2018 engaged in social abuse, such as restricting access to social networks, damaging reputations, and relocating victims away from support (Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network, 2022). Gaslighters often prevent victims from maintaining contact with friends and family, which limits access to information or support that could disconfirm their deception (Hailes, 2022). Gaslighters in this study isolated victims by preventing contact with friend and family, monopolising the victim's time, or physically relocating them. Beyond direct isolation, perpetrators were also identified as ingratiating themselves to the victim's social network or spreading harmful lies to damage the victim's reputation. In some cases, perpetrators even involved others in the gaslighting, convincing them to reinforce their version of events, further isolating the victim and limiting external validation.

Gaslighting has been noted by Hailes (2022) to occasionally overlap with other forms of abuse. This is particularly clear in instances of emotional abuse where victims are insulted or have their experiences invalidated. The current study found that gaslighting did often coincide with other forms of abuse, however, this other abuse played an important role in the gaslighting. The abuse exhausted and depleted the victim's emotional resources making it harder to resist gaslighting or was used to threaten the victim into a coerced agreement. Further, sometimes gaslighting was used to conceal the presence of other types of abuse. As argued by

Sarkis (2018), gaslighting allows perpetrators to commit abuse while silencing the victim and maintaining an image of respectability. Whether used alongside other abusive behaviours, or to conceal them, our data shows that gaslighting can play an important function to control narratives around the perpetrator's behaviour.

Finally, a perpetrator's history may influence their likelihood of engaging in gaslighting. Although research on IPV perpetration indicates that risk factors include growing up in a violent household and witnessing IPV (Clare et al., 2021), there is no direct evidence that witnessing gaslighting increases the likelihood of using it in future relationships. However, victim-survivors reported in this study that their partners often had experienced adverse childhoods, lacked models of healthy communication, or engaged in gaslighting within past relationships. Since gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse, it may follow similar patterns as other types of psychological abuse, where early exposure hinders the development of healthy communication in later relationships (Nepl et al., 2019). However, as it stands, there is highly limited research into factors underlying the decision to gaslight.

Access to Support and Resources Play a Key Role in Inhibiting Gaslighting.

Access to support and resources plays a critical role in shaping a victim's experience of gaslighting, particularly within IPV contexts. While isolation has been sporadically noted in gaslighting theory (e.g., Ahern, 2018) it remains a relatively new factor in empirical studies on gaslighting dynamics (e.g., Kelin, Li, & Wood, 2023). Support networks are crucial as they provide validation and external perspectives that help challenge the gaslighters' manipulative narratives. For example, Rodrigues, Mendenhall and Clancy (2021) found that women of colour experiencing gaslighting in the workplace faced greater challenges in coping with discrimination due to isolation from support networks, which led to minimising or internalising harassment. Similarly, in the current study, victim-survivors frequently highlighted that access to both formal and informal support was often critical in inhibiting gaslighting and emphasised

its importance far beyond individual factors such as personality, prior experience, or vulnerability.

Informal support networks, such as friends, family, colleagues, or community, are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing IPV (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Simmons et al., 2011). Victim-survivors may turn to informal networks before seeking formal assistance due to fears or retaliation, forced separation, stigma, or negative past experiences with formal services (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). Further, several barriers prevent access to formal support systems, including financial dependency on the abuser, lack of cultural sensitivity of training received by support workers, or limited availability of meaningful resources (AIHW, 2024; Sullivan, 2011). Consequentially, informal support often becomes the only accessible form of help for many experiencing IPV. This study identified that informal networks provided an important first point of contact, and counter perspective to the gaslighting. It played an important function both in validating the victim's experiences and providing challenges to the narrative control of the perpetrator. However, whether as a result of isolation or from not having a strong network prior to the relationship, informal networks are not always an option for victim-survivors (Hailes, 2022).

Formal support systems such as police, courts, mental health services, shelters, and advocacy groups, offer protections and resources that informal networks cannot provide (Simmons et al., 2011). However, there are complex issues that impact disclosure and access to formal support in the context of IPV. For instance, perpetrators can exploit vulnerabilities in these systems, particularly male perpetrators who can manipulate societal biases against female victims by portraying them as "crazy" or "unstable" (Sweet, 2019). Respondents in this study reported these vulnerabilities were used against them, with authorities frequently believing the perpetrator's version of events, and consequently further reinforcing the gaslighting. Further, support service providers noted instances where victim-survivors presented as distressed and

confused to authorities, leading to them being disbelieved. Thus, access to formal support often depends on the system's awareness of psychological abuse. Moreover, training in recognising gaslighting is vital to prevent these services from being used to reinforce the abuser's control (Sweet, 2019).

The current study emphasised the importance of public education in identifying and addressing gaslighting. Improved education about early warning signs in relationships, and patterns of abuse, can improve both victim and third-party recognition. Klein et al. (2023) found that many victims began their recovery once they could label their partner's behaviour as gaslighting. Similarly, Simmons et al., (2011) noted that a lack of public awareness about IPV behaviours and available support resources is a significant barrier to seeking help. Respondents in the current study called for educational campaigns to equip both formal and informal support systems to better recognise the functions, patterns, and outcomes of gaslighting. Educational campaigns may decrease disbelief and misidentification, and aid intervention and appropriate support.

Limited research exists on the role of individual factors and the likelihood of experiencing gaslighting. Hailes (2022) identified some individual factors that may cause increased vulnerability to gaslighting, including traumatic stress responses, pre-existing schemas surrounding blame, and prior experiences of gaslighting. This study also identified some individual level factors influencing the experience of victim-survivors. This included their safety to challenge the gaslighting attempts, such as deteriorating mental health, dependency upon their abuser for disability support or financial aid, or fears of physical retaliation. However, unlike Hailes (2022), prior experience of gaslighting and abuse was found to have a complicated relationship with the recognition of gaslighting. On the one hand, it was described as increasing vulnerability by reinforcing negative schemas around blame, or abuse

normalisation. On the other hand, it sometimes helped victim-survivors recognise gaslighting behaviours more quickly in new relationships.

Further, victim-survivors described individual-based coping strategies for gaslighting, such as documenting events and conversations to refer to during moments of doubt, or avoiding responding to the abuser's provocations. However, respondents stressed that these approaches were not sufficient in isolation, as in some instances these tactics exacerbated the abuse. Protective strategies were most effective when used in conjunction with support from friends, family, or formal services. Protective factors such as confidence and self-esteem were also described as playing a role in mitigating the effects of gaslighting, though it was noted that these qualities are often undermined by the abuse itself. While self-esteem is important for recovery from gaslighting, and may potentially act as a protective factor, it is likely something that needs to be supported and rebuilt through external sources of empowerment.

Pre-Existing Relationship Dynamics Play a Role in the Impact of Gaslighting.

Understanding how relationship dynamics and context influence the use of gaslighting is crucial for developing effective interventions and support strategies. Gaslighting involves multiple instances of abuse in a close relationship and is intertwined with broader relational dynamics such as power, trust, and intimacy. As gaslighting within IPV is under-researched, little evidence exists regarding whether it must occur in unequal relationships, or which types of relationships are more susceptible to this form of abuse. In the broader context of psychological abuse, it does often occur in relationships with pre-existing power imbalances such as parent-child dynamics, gender inequalities, and disability (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2018; Breiding & Armour, 2015). Indeed, Calef and Weinshel (1981) defined gaslighting as an attempt to 'influence' another person into doubting their own judgments, linking the ability of a person to gaslight to their ability to influence. However, psychological abuse can also produce a power imbalance by disempowering individuals and making them easier to control (O'Leary,

1999). From this perspective, gaslighting, as a form of psychological abuse, could be argued to rely on, and produce, power imbalances in relationships.

The role of power in relationships is complex, as different individuals may possess various types of power. Graves and Samp (2021) examined the role of ‘dependence power’ in gaslighting, the ability to influence someone through their reliance upon one another for needs such as housing, finances, or emotional support (Graves & Samp, 2021). They found that gaslighting leverages existing dependencies and generates dependency by making victims rely upon the gaslighter for sense-making and reality validation. Interestingly, they found that individuals with high and low dependence power both used gaslighting, while those in more equal relationships employed more overt power strategies. Klein et al. (2023) argued that gaslighting also depends on social power, as this enables perpetrators to influence the perspective of the victim and others. Indeed, Sweet (2019) found that perpetrators weaponised social power in the form of social status (e.g., gender, race) and stereotypes (e.g., hysterical women) to manipulate the victim and those around them.

The findings of the current study echoed these observations, identifying that perpetrators leveraged inequalities in social status, education, income, physical size, and age to exert influence. Dependencies, such as financial dependency or shared parenting responsibilities, added pressure to avoid challenging the gaslighting. Victim-survivors often faced resistance in raising concerns about their partner, particularly when their partner held social sway or community support. Power imbalances, whether overt or implied, were described as silencing victims and pressuring deferral to their partner’s perspective. These dynamics were also observed by service providers, in cases where perpetrators frequently spoke on behalf of the victim, and with the victim often minimising their experiences.

Intimacy can also play an important role in facilitating gaslighting. Abramson (2014) suggested that intimacy binds victims to perpetrators through investments such as shared

children, finances, time and energy, producing practical and emotional forms of leverage. Additionally, perpetrators can weaponise private information obtained through closeness to manipulate more effectively. Abramson (2014) argued that gaslighting exploits the need to be understood by loved ones and the tendency to consider things more deeply when raised by people one cares about. Respondents in this study confirmed that their trust in, and empathy for their partner facilitated gaslighting, as they extended benefit of the doubt more than they would have otherwise. Trust and intimacy places perpetrators in positions where they can use validation as a form of control and power (Spear, 2020). Therefore, while practical and social inequalities play a role, gaslighting also weaponises the trust that arises from intimacy.

Cultural Attitudes and Public Responses Can Prevent or Reinforce Gaslighting.

Cultural attitudes towards psychological abuse play an important role in both preventing and reinforcing gaslighting. Gaslighting has been argued to rely heavily upon pre-existing societal norms and cultural tools, which shape the acceptability of specific behaviours in relationships (Catapang Podosky, 2019). Guerin and De Oliveria (2017) noted that many abusive behaviours in IPV are extreme forms of socially acceptable forms of control, often rooted in cultural expectations such as privacy around intimate matters, and the expectation that men should govern certain aspects of relationship. This attitude is reflected in the Tasmania's *Family Violence Act 2004*, which stipulates that an action is considered abusive once it begins to exceed a reasonable level of control or intimidation. Written into this act is the assumption that any level of control and intimidation of a partner is acceptable within intimate relationships (McMahon & McGorrery, 2017). This study, similar to the work of Sweet (2019) and (Hailes, 2022) found that gender roles and societal acceptance of psychological abuse deeply affected victim-survivor's experiences of gaslighting.

While gaslighting is not inherently gendered, societal norms make it easier for men to exploit credibility and power. Though the lack of prevalence studies makes it challenging to

assess whether gaslighting perpetration is more common among men or women, Sweet (2019) found that men often weaponise greater access to credibility, rationality, and economic and social capital to strengthen their ability to gaslight. This power imbalance becomes even more dangerous when intersected with other marginalisations such as race, immigration status, or disability. Respondents in this study highlighted how societal expectations, such as beliefs that women should be loyal, or work to fix relationships, pressured them to tolerate gaslighting. Further, community acceptance of male control also provided perpetrators with tools to justify controlling behaviour under the guise of ‘protecting’ or ‘controlling her for her own good’. However, it is important to note that men also experienced gaslighting in this study and reported difficulty when seeking support due to a lack of community recognition of male victims and female abusers.

Community attitudes toward IPV are crucial in shaping the experience of victim-survivors in Australia. Myths, such as the belief that women can easily leave abusive relationships or that abuse ends when the relationship does, continue to influence perceptions of IPV (Webster et al., 2018). Although awareness of IPV has grown, subtler forms of abuse such as emotional abuse or coercive control are still not widely recognised (Coumarelos et al., 2021). Increasing public understanding of these forms of abuse is crucial for improving victim-survivors’ likelihood of seeking support and receiving validation (Webster et al., 2018). In this study, it was observed that in some cases communities were less equipped to recognise non-physical abuse, dismissing these behaviours or blaming the victim. These attitudes were especially impactful in situations where witnesses or bystanders were present during the gaslighting, as their decision to intervene or not had a large impact on the victim-survivor’s mental health and decision to seek further support.

Recently, there have been recommendations from professionals in the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce (2021) for targeted media campaigns and educational programs about

unhealthy relationships and coercive control. For example, the NSW Government's 'It's Not Love, It's Coercive Control' campaign focuses on increasing community recognition of subtle forms of control. While these efforts are a step in the right direction, research suggests that IPV awareness campaigns must be tailored to specific behaviours and communities to maximise their effectiveness (Stanley et al., 2017). Therefore, public campaigns that address the patterns, signs, and cultural attitudes underlying gaslighting, as well as early interventions, may play an important role in improving community response to this form of abuse.

There Are a Wide Range of Immediate and Long-Term Impacts of Gaslighting

Understanding the outcomes of psychological abuse, including gaslighting, is essential for informing policy and legal frameworks, as it directly impacts the development of evidence-based approaches towards trauma and IPV in the justice system. Research on the outcomes of psychological abuse, including gaslighting, is limited due to the complexities of defining and isolating its effects from other forms of violence (Rogers & Follingstad, 2014). However, understanding the role that psychological abuse plays in producing immediate and long-term harm within IPV is critical to developing appropriate supports.

Existing literature often characterises the outcomes of gaslighting as feelings of 'going crazy', a surreal sense of reality, and a loss of self-trust and identity (Sweet, 2019). While these are the most commonly described effects, some authors suggest that ongoing gaslighting may have broader impacts, including depression, feelings of worthlessness, and strained relationships with friends and family (Abramson, 2014). Due to the complex and context-specific nature of gaslighting, it is likely that outcomes will vary greatly across individuals and relationships. Given the diversity of experiences among victim-survivors and service providers in this study, gaslighting was found to result in a wide range of impacts across multiple domains, spanning cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, physical, and practical areas (e.g., financial, legal, and medical costs).

Impacts across the domains were deeply interconnected, and mutually reinforcing. Common cognitive effects included difficulties with self-trust and loss of identity. Further, many victim-survivors reported worsening mental health, or expressed concerns that they had ‘gone crazy’ or were losing their memory. The emotional toll of gaslighting was significant, marked by feelings of anger, helplessness, shame, and loneliness. This was worsened by the invalidation they experienced, both from the perpetrator and others, which led to growing mistrust of their own emotional responses. To avoid emotional harm or invalidation, victim-survivors often described behavioural changes, such as relying on others to make decisions or avoiding social interactions for fear of being judged or invalidated. As Hailes (2022) similarly found, social isolation during and after the relationship was a common consequence of gaslighting. This was driven by both the abuser’s manipulation of social networks, and the victim’s emotional and cognitive distress resulting from prolonged gaslighting.

In the context of coercive control, Stark (2007) describes the ‘condition of entrapment’ or ‘unfreedom’ as arising from a constellation of tactics that cumulatively restrict a victim’s autonomy, confidence, and capacity for resistance. The cumulative and varying impacts of gaslighting suggests it may contribute to similar conditions. Rather than imposing behavioural constraints, gaslighting destabilises cognitive and perceptual faculties (e.g., eroding self-trust, creating confusion, and fostering dependence on the perpetrator for interpretations of events, emotions, and decisions). This reduces perceived autonomy and increases reliance in ways that parallel the entrapment described in coercive control literature. In this sense, gaslighting can be understood as creating a form of internalised or psychological entrapment that aligns with Stark’s account of unfreedom, while operating through a mechanism of epistemic erosion rather than the external restrictions characteristic of coercive control.

In addition to cognitive, emotional, and social impacts, gaslighting also had physical and practical consequences. Like other forms of IPV (Dye, 2020), gaslighting caused physical

effects such as chronic exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and somatisation. As victim-survivors became more physically and mentally fatigued, it became increasingly harder to resist the gaslighting. Gaslighting also directly undermined work performance, due to diminished self-confidence and chronic fatigue. In some cases, this led to victims leaving their jobs and becoming financially dependent on their abusive partner, consequently becoming further isolated. A study by Peterson et al., (2018) found the average lifetime cost of IPV for women, encompassing missed work, relocation, medical and legal expenses, was \$103,767(USD). Similar financial, legal, and medical costs were associated with gaslighting and often extended beyond the end of the relationship.

Gaslighting victims often face further trauma when interacting with police and legal systems. Research has shown that interactions with these systems can often be traumatic and ineffective for victim-survivors of IPV (Ward, 2021). For example, Australian studies have documented instances where victims-survivors have protective orders being used against them as a form of abuse (Nancarrow et al., 2020). Certain groups, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, and First Nations people, are particularly vulnerable to being mischaracterised under domestic violence laws (Ward, 2021). Perpetrators of IPV frequently exploit legal systems as a form of control, undermining victim-survivors' trust in government and legal institutions (Carson et al., 2022). Sweet (2019) and Hailes (2022) highlight that perpetrators often use institutional weaknesses to discredit the victims, further reinforcing the gaslighting. This phenomenon spans various services, including legal, health, immigration and welfare systems (Hailes, 2022). A key vulnerability in these institutions is a lack of understanding of victimisation and the persistence of stereotypes of marginalised groups (e.g., women, CaLD groups). As gaslighting often causes confusion, self-doubt, memory issues, and emotional distress, victims are at heightened risk of being dismissed or disbelieved by systems meant to support them (e.g., Epstein & Goodman,

2019). Many victim-survivors and service providers in this study reported negative experiences with these institutions, and a reluctance to engage with authorities.

Recovery from gaslighting is highly individualised, varying depending on the nature and duration of the abuse. While distancing oneself from the abuser is a critical step towards healing, it is only part of the process. Given the complex and context-specific nature of gaslighting, outcomes differ depending on the form or intensity of the abuse (Hailes, 2022). Kelin, Li, and Wood (2023) and Hailes (2022) emphasised that rebuilding self-trust and agency is vital for recovery, though this process is often non-linear and lacks a clear timeline. Some researchers propose strategies such as social reintegration and activities that restore agency (Klein et al., 2023), however, overall research into recovery from gaslighting remains limited. It is important to recognise that individual instances of validation or empowerment, while beneficial, may not fully counteract the damage caused by long-term gaslighting, especially when cultural and systemic factors play a large role. While some victim-survivors in this study were further along their recovery journey, others expressed concerns that the impact on their self-image and trust in others may always persist in some capacity. While there is more to understand about recovery from gaslighting, without continued support, resources, and better public and institutional awareness of psychological abuse, breaking the cycle of gaslighting may be exceedingly difficult.

Limitations, Implications, and Directions for Future Research

Despite the widespread prevalence of psychological abuse and the growing use of the term “gaslighting”, research, particularly within the context of IPV, remains limited. This study examined gaslighting from victim-survivors’ and service providers’ perspectives, proposing a model that captures the diverse experiences and outcomes of gaslighting in IPV. Building on previous models that explored interpersonal dynamics (Klein, et al., 2023), ecological factors (Sweet, 2019), and a combination of these (Hailes, 2022), the current model identified a

broader range of factors contributing to gaslighting. Gaslighting is shown to be a complex social phenomenon shaped by cultural tools, such as societal norms around relationships and gender, power imbalances, public education, institutional vulnerabilities, and the co-occurrence of other forms of abuse. As with other forms of psychological abuse, simply counting instances of gaslighting fails to capture its full impact on victims (Follingstad, 2007). It's often-covert nature makes it difficult to identify and quantify. Sweet (2019) argues that gaslighting is best understood as a culmination of multiple instances and forms of invalidation, discrediting, and isolation, creating a broader sense of 'surreality' over time. Thus, models of gaslighting are critical for understanding how gaslighting relies upon and reinforces power imbalances that undermine victims' abilities to validate their experiences.

Improved awareness of gaslighting and the behaviours that facilitate and inhibit its effects has practical implications. First, it may improve identification of gaslighting victims by service providers, law enforcement, and Family Courts. Due to ongoing invalidation, confusion, and narrative control imposed by perpetrators, victim-survivors may be misrepresented and misunderstood by these institutions. Enhancing recognition of the complex ways gaslighting victims present could improve access to services and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation. Further research on how gaslighting affects recall and testimony is also needed, as this type of abuse has significant implications for how victim-survivors recount their experiences in court. As Sweet (2019) notes, without addressing the inherent biases against victim-survivors and improving training for professionals in legal, medical, and mental health fields, efforts to address gaslighting will likely fail. Finally, public awareness campaigns are also vital, as greater recognition of non-physical forms of abuse can encourage bystanders to offer support and help victim-survivors seek services (Webster et al., 2018). While existing campaigns on coercive control and psychological abuse exist in NSW, targeting specific behaviours in specific communities may be more effective (Stanley et al., 2017). Therefore,

local recognition and understanding of gaslighting are crucial for raising awareness and enhancing prevention and intervention efforts.

Given the early stage of gaslighting research, several gaps remain. Given the early stage of gaslighting research, several gaps remain. This model was developed through an inductive, descriptive approach grounded in participant narratives and does not claim to be predictive or diagnostic in a formal theoretical sense. We deliberately avoided anchoring the analysis in a single theoretical tradition, psychological, sociological, or criminological, to prevent over-interpreting participants' accounts, particularly given the constraints of a written survey and the absence of follow-up interviews. While this limits the model's theoretical integration and may make category boundaries appear more intuitive than analytically driven, it reflects an ethical and methodological commitment to preserving the integrity of lived experience in an under researched area. As such, this framework should be viewed as a foundational step, offering conceptual clarity to inform future theory-building, hypothesis testing, and applied research.

While this model broadens previous ones by incorporating diverse perspectives, future research would benefit from investigating the perspective of perpetrators to better understand the dynamics of gaslighting. Although earlier studies have theorised perpetrators' motives (Abramson, 2014) or explored victim-survivors' beliefs (Klein et al., 2023), perpetrators' viewpoints remain a crucial missing element. Understanding motivations and factors that enable gaslighting is key to developing effective interventions. Gaslighting, like other forms of psychological abuse, involves complex interpersonal dynamics where lines between perpetrator and victim are sometimes unclear (Follingstad, 2007). Stern (2007) observed that gaslighting can be bi-directional, with both parties engaged in it, either on different topics or at different times in the relationship. Researching the experiences of all parties involved could provide valuable insight into the behaviours and cycles of this form of abuse. Although it is

important to note that the conditions that contribute to the impact of abuse will not be equal across parties within the context of IPV and coercive control (Stark, 2007). This limitation also applies to the gender and cultural representation of this model. This study did not differentiate by gender, and the sample was predominantly female. Future research would benefit from investigating diverse gender experiences of gaslighting. Further, while this study did have a diverse sample, with a wide range of ethnicities and countries of origin, no direct questions were posed about the role of specific cultural or community identities. This is a considerable limitation, as culture is an underexplored but potentially significant factor in the experience of gaslighting. Future research should actively explore potential cultural differences, given the significance of social norms and tools highlighted in this study.

Additionally, the Australian sociopolitical and legal context may limit the transferability of the findings. Legal frameworks, public awareness levels, and institutional responses to IPV vary widely across countries, and these differences may shape the ways gaslighting is experienced, perceived, and reported. Further, although the inclusion criteria were not gender-exclusive, the model predominantly reflects a female-victim/male-perpetrator framing, which may limit its applicability to other relationship configurations. The recruitment strategy also introduces potential sampling biases. As participants were largely recruited through Australian IPV support organisations and advocacy-oriented Facebook groups, they were self-selected and may have been more familiar with abuse terminology. This prior exposure could influence the way experiences were framed, and potentially privilege narratives already aligned with advocacy or clinical language. Future research would benefit from diversifying recruitment pathways to include participants with varying degrees of awareness of these concepts.

Future research should also consider distinguishing the effects of gaslighting from other forms of abuse, particularly emotional abuse and coercive control. Gaslighting is unlikely to

occur in isolation, making it difficult to separate the extent of its negative impact from other forms of abuse. However, as psychological abuse has been linked to severe mental and physical health consequences for victim-survivors and it affects the recovery of victim-survivors (Rogers & Follingstad, 2014), understanding the unique role of gaslighting is an important area for further study. Exploring different approaches to gaslighting, and their impacts, is another promising direction. Hailes (2022) suggested that targeting different domains (e.g., affect, memory, judgment), might lead to varied outcomes. Although the current model presents a wide range of factors and outcomes, it is possible some of these factors are more harmful than others or produce different effects

Finally, prevalence studies that improve understanding of the populations and contexts in which gaslighting is most common is essential for developing effective interventions. Limited research exists on gaslighting prevalence, and it is often conflated with other forms of control (e.g., Boxall, Morgan & Brown, 2020). Since gaslighting is a social phenomenon, understanding its prevalence, its impact alongside other abuse, and the role of culture in recognising it is vital for creating effective interventions. While future research into gaslighting is essential, this model offers a foundation for supporting research, policy, and legal frameworks aimed at addressing the distinct ways gaslighting manifests in IPV.

This model makes a distinct contribution by integrating the interpersonal mechanisms of gaslighting with the broader social and institutional forces that sustain it, an integration largely absent from existing frameworks, which often focus on only one level of analysis. Grounded in both victim-survivor and practitioner insights, it captures the nuanced ways gaslighting unfolds and is reinforced in real-world IPV contexts. In a field marked by conceptual fragmentation, this empirically based and comprehensive framework provides the clarity and breadth necessary to advance research, inform policy, and enhance interventions.

Chapter 4: Public Perceptions of Gaslighting

Preamble

The content of this chapter is based on an article published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a covert form of psychological manipulation that undermines an individual's confidence in their perceptions, thoughts, and memories, often by labelling them as irrational or 'crazy.' Public awareness of gaslighting has surged in recent years, making it a common topic in media and popular culture. However, empirical research has lagged behind, leaving gaps in understanding how the public perceives and defines this form of abuse. Addressing public understanding of covert abuse is critical for improving early recognition by victim-survivors, bystanders, and front-line services, as well as encouraging support-seeking behaviours. This study examined public perceptions of gaslighting by presenting 595 university students with vignettes manipulating key contested components: repetition, intention, and victim-survivor outcomes. Participants assessed the vignettes on seriousness, acceptability, likelihood of intervention, and whether they classified the behaviour as gaslighting. They also provided definitions of gaslighting and completed a gaslighting acceptance scale. Findings indicate that while students generally recognise gaslighting as emotional abuse, ambiguities remain in its definition and identification. These results underscore the need for educational campaigns to clarify gaslighting's patterns and severity. Targeted initiatives, particularly in schools and community settings, could foster cultural change, enhance bystander intervention, and reduce the prevalence of covert abusive behaviours.

Introduction

Gaslighting in Intimate Partner Violence

Psychological abuse has long been recognised as a core element of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), often described by victim-survivors as more damaging than physical violence due to its enduring effects on self-perception and autonomy (Follingstad et al., 1990; Johnson, 2008). Gaslighting refers to a specific pattern of psychological manipulation in which an individual seeks to undermine their partner's confidence in their own thoughts, beliefs, and memories, often labelling them 'crazy' or irrational (Abramson, 2014). Despite the term's growing prominence in public discourse (Medaris, 2024), gaslighting remains under-theorised and inconsistently defined within IPV research.

Existing IPV models, such as the Duluth Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), Coercive Control (Stark, 2007), and Intimate Terrorism (Johnson, 2008), address related tactics (e.g., emotional manipulation, minimising, denying, and blame-shifting), but often treat these behaviours as interchangeable tools within a broader strategy of control. In contrast, gaslighting refers to a distinctive mechanism that directly targets perception, memory, and self-trust (Abramson, 2014; Hailes, 2022; Bhatti et al., 2021). Rather than aiming to control behaviour, gaslighting destabilises a person's internal sense of reality, which can have uniquely harmful, disorientating, and isolating effects (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). Outside of IPV, other models share conceptual similarities with gaslighting tactics. One such model is DARVO (Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender; Harsey & Freyd, 2020), a manipulation strategy often discussed in the context of sexual assault allegations. DARVO involves a perpetrator denying harm, attacking the victim's credibility, and positioning themselves as the victim. While distinct from gaslighting, DARVO illustrates how strategies of blame-shifting and victim discreditation recur across various forms of gendered violence.

The unique impact of gaslighting behaviours has been recognised in the limited research that has been done. For example, Sackett and Saunders (1999) found that the item “*how often does your partner suggest you’re crazy or stupid*” (p. 13), a clear example of gaslighting, was rated as the most severe form of psychological abuse and the strongest predictor of psychological harm. Similarly, in the only known survey explicitly measuring the prevalence of gaslighting in IPV, over 85% of victim-survivors reported experiencing gaslighting tactics (Warshaw et al., 2014).

This distinction is not merely semantic. As Johnson (2008) argued in relation to Intimate Terrorism, IPV interventions must take into account specific types and tactics of abuse to be effective. Indeed, a recent New South Wales (NSW) Joint Selection Committee on Coercive Control (Easteal, 2021) emphasised that gaslighting plays a central role in IPV by eroding self-trust and reinforcing other forms of abuse. This direct impact on self-perception has practical implications for victim-survivors’ mental health, help-seeking behaviours, and credibility within legal systems (Sweet, 2019; Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Darke et al., 2025b). Treating gaslighting as a distinct tactic of IPV is essential for developing effective and targeted interventions.

Public Discourse and Conceptual Creep

While some pioneering research has begun exploring the unique dynamics and harms of gaslighting within IPV (e.g., Sweet, 2019; Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Darke et al., 2025b), a significant gap remains in understanding public perceptions of this insidious and damaging form of abuse. Meanwhile, public discourse about gaslighting appears to have taken on a life of its own, expanding beyond IPV contexts and permeating popular culture and platforms such as social media and reality television (e.g., Porter & Standing, 2020). This reflects a broader trend known as ‘conceptual creep’ (Haslam, 2016), in which terms describing negative human experiences become increasingly broad, eventually losing descriptive power as they

pathologise both normal and abnormal behaviour. Although the widespread use of the term ‘gaslighting’ does have benefits, as it raises awareness of covert abuse tactics, the overuse of the term, coupled with insufficient educational initiatives, risks misapplication and misunderstanding (Medaris, 2024).

The disconnect between academic knowledge, lived experience of IPV victim-survivors, and public awareness has profound implications for addressing gaslighting effectively. Recent studies (e.g., Darke et al., 2025b; Hailes & Goodman, 2023) have advanced current knowledge by aligning academic perspectives with victim-survivor experiences, thereby providing a stronger foundation for research, practice, and policy, and supporting more accurate understanding of how gaslighting operates within IPV across various systems, including legal contexts. Understanding the term’s usage in public discourse is a crucial next step, as public awareness plays a critical role in early detection, intervention, and reducing stigma associated with IPV (e.g., Simmons et al., 2011).

For example, a survey of UK citizens found that while there was good general awareness of abuse, many struggled to recognise specific instances of abuse as they occurred (Sivarajasingam et al., 2022). Similarly, in Australia, community awareness of IPV has increased significantly in recent years, however, several forms of abuse such as coercive control or emotional abuse are still less readily identified as abusive behaviours by the broader public (Coumarelos et al., 2021). In response to this, the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce (2021) has advocated for improved education on everyday coercive and disrespectful behaviours contributing to IPV, particularly within schools and early education settings. Young adults are particularly important to focus on, as they are overrepresented as victim-survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Cunningham & Anderson, 2022).

The term ‘gaslighting’ is frequently used in public discourse to describe a wide range of behaviours, including lying or simple disagreement (e.g., DiGiulio, 2018; Kippert, 2021),

and its misuse and overgeneralisation reflects a substantial lack of clarity and understanding about its meaning. Even amongst academics, there is not a consistent agreed upon definition (Darke et al., 2025a). Although there is general consensus that gaslighting involves manipulation and reality distortion (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021), key definitional components remain contested. Scholars differ on whether repetition, intention, outcome, power dynamics, or connections to other forms of abuse, are essential elements of gaslighting (e.g., Berenstain, 2020; Graves & Samps, 2021; Hailes, 2022; Darke et al., 2025b).

Practical Implications of Definitional Ambiguity

How gaslighting is defined and communicated influences not only theoretical models of IPV but also how behaviours are recognised by the public and by practitioners operating within existing legal and service frameworks. Different legal contexts vary in the extent to which intention must be established; some require proof of intent to classify behaviour as abusive, whereas others assess patterns of behaviour or risk without relying on inferred motives. For example, the NSW coercive control offences include an explicit intention requirement (Department of Communities and Justice, 2024). This variation highlights the relevance of the ongoing debate about whether coercive and controlling behaviours, such as gaslighting, can occur unintentionally. While some scholars argue that gaslighting can be both conscious and unconscious (e.g., Dorpat, 1996), others contend that intentionality is necessary (e.g., Berenstain, 2020).

The role of repetition and victim outcome is similarly important in definitional discussions. Whether gaslighting requires a repeated pattern of behaviour or can occur in a single instance directly affects how it is identified by researchers and practitioners and shapes how it aligns with different policy and legal contexts. Some systems focus primarily on patterns of coercive behaviour, whereas others rely on evidence of a severe and isolated instance of abuse (Stark, 2012). Likewise, scholarly debate continues over whether specific

outcomes, such as confusion, self-doubt, or diminished confidence, are essential for gaslighting classification (e.g., Hailes, 2022). These discussions raise broader questions about how thresholds of harm are conceptualised in research and practice.

Additional elements such as intimacy, isolation, power imbalance, and the relationship between gaslighting and other forms of abuse (verbal, emotional, physical) are also central to understanding how gaslighting functions within IPV. While these elements may be less explicit in legal or policy definitions, they play an important role in reinforcing and enabling gaslighting and are critical for developing effective prevention, recognition, and response strategies in community and service contexts (Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Darke et al., 2025b).

To establish clearer conceptual boundaries around behaviours considered to constitute gaslighting by those most familiar with it, Chapter 2 (i.e., Darke et al., 2025b) conducted a study surveying victim-survivors and support service providers. Key components identified included manipulative behaviour, victim outcomes, intention, repetition, subsidiary abuse tactics, and the context in which gaslighting occurs, such as within relationships characterised by intimacy and power imbalance. While all these components were acknowledged as relevant to defining gaslighting, their relative importance varied depending upon the context and severity of the situation. Importantly, while intention was recognised as a contributing factor, there was no consensus among respondents on whether it was essential, suggesting that the pattern of manipulation may be more important than intent alone. Similarly, while specific outcomes (e.g., self-doubt or confusion) are commonly associated with repeated gaslighting, they may not always be necessary to identify the behaviour, particularly if the actions are severe and repetitive (Darke et al., 2025b). This flexible, context-sensitive approach provided a more comprehensive and representative understanding of gaslighting in IPV, as described by participants in the study. However, it is yet to be established if these nuanced conceptions of gaslighting are reflected in broader public discourse.

Present Study

Building on these findings, the present study aimed to investigate the attitudes of young adult students towards gaslighting and examine how closely these align with the definitions articulated by victim-survivors in Chapter 2. The research was guided by the central question: what characteristics do young adults use to determine whether gaslighting has occurred? This question was divided into three key components: (a) the behavioural features that influence recognition of gaslighting, (b) the criteria individuals use to define gaslighting, (c) the impact of personal attitudes towards gaslighting. These questions were explored through a combination of three methods.

In the current study, participants were asked to read vignettes manipulating three commonly discussed, but inconsistent, elements identified in prior literature i.e., repetition, intention, and victim outcome (i.e., response). While perspectives on the outcomes of gaslighting are varied and sometimes contested, the vignettes specifically focus on the victim's internal and external response (i.e., belief/agreement vs disbelief/disagreement) as this reflects a core feature of gaslighting, self-doubt (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). This task assessed how these elements influence participants' judgements about whether gaslighting has occurred. By varying their inclusion in written vignettes, the current study evaluated how these components impact participants' judgements of the seriousness and acceptability of the behaviour, the need to intervene, and how strongly they perceive gaslighting to have taken place.

Then, participants were asked to define gaslighting by selecting behaviours from a list that included common definitional components (manipulative behaviour, self-doubt outcome, intention, and repetition), less common ones (i.e., isolation, power dynamics, intimacy, other forms of abuse), and irrelevant ones (i.e., healthy listening, supportive relationships, mutual respect). Lastly, individual differences were assessed by examining participants' level of acceptance of gaslighting behaviours and whether this shaped their interpretation of the

vignette, beyond the specific experimental manipulations. Acceptability of gaslighting suggests a level of comfort or normalisation of these behaviours, which may affect how participants recognise and assess gaslighting in a real-world context.

For the recognition of gaslighting in vignettes, given the reported frequency that intention, repetition, and victim response are included in both academic discussions and public discourse (Darke et al., 2025a), it was hypothesised that:

(H1) scenarios including these three elements would lead to higher recognition of gaslighting, and;

(H2) these components would result in higher ratings of seriousness of the behaviour, a greater perceived need for intervention, and lower ratings of acceptability.

For the definitions of gaslighting, assuming that participant definitions are aligned with the attitudes of victim-survivors in Chapter 2, it was hypothesised that:

(H3) participants would most frequently select definitional components that are central to the victim-survivor definitions, such as manipulative behaviour, self-doubt outcome, and repetition.

(H4) As ‘intention’ was found to be controversial in Chapter 2 and divided victim-survivor definitions, this component was predicted to be selected by approximately half the participants.

(H5) Subsidiary elements including intimacy, isolation, power imbalance, verbal abuse, emotional abuse and physical intimidation are less commonly included in literature definitions of gaslighting and played facilitatory roles to the experience of gaslighting as described by victim-survivors. Consequently, these elements were hypothesised to be selected less frequently.

Lastly, for the individual differences in acceptance of gaslighting behaviours, it was hypothesised that:

(H6) Higher levels of acceptance of gaslighting behaviours would be associated with lower recognition of gaslighting, lower ratings of seriousness, and lower perceived importance for intervention in the vignettes. This would suggest that individuals who are more accepting of gaslighting behaviours may find it harder to identify gaslighting or may play down its seriousness.

Transparency and Openness

Preregistration, data, and materials are available on Open Science Framework: osf.io/286wj. This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2023/385) on June 29, 2023.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

A total of 918 undergraduate psychology students from the University of Sydney completed the study as part of their coursework, however only those who met the inclusion criteria were analysed. The inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18, fluent in English, and to have provided consent for their data to be used in publications. Additionally, participants were required to pass attention checks, assessed through comprehension questions related to vignettes included in the study. These criteria led to the exclusion of 323 students. The demographic characteristics of the final sample of 595 students are depicted in Table 4.1. As can be seen, the sample was predominately female and young. Region of birth was highly diverse, and more detailed demographic breakdown including ethnicity is provided in Appendix D.

Design

This study consisted of three tasks: experimental vignettes, defining gaslighting, and acceptability ratings. The vignette task utilised a 2 (repetition) x 2 (intention) x 2 (victim response) between subject design, resulting in eight experimental conditions. The dependent

variables were ratings on acceptability, seriousness, need to intervene, and whether it is gaslighting. Participants (n=595), were randomly allocated to one of the eight conditions, as outlined in Table 4.4. The definition task was presented only to participants who indicated familiarity with the term ‘gaslighting’ (n=569) and was presented after the vignette task to avoid priming. All participants (n = 595) also completed acceptability ratings.

Table 4.1

Demographics of Participant Sample

Characteristics		n	%	M	SD
Gender	Women	443	74.5%		
	Men	147	24.7%		
	Non-Binary	5	0.8%		
Age				19.6	4.0
Region of Birth					
	Australia	373	62.7%		
	Asia	160	27.0%		
	Europe	26	4.4%		
	Africa	9	1.5%		
	New Zealand	8	1.3%		
	Middle East	8	1.3%		
	North America	8	1.3%		
	South America	3	0.5%		

Materials and Procedure.

Participation in the study was compulsory as part of coursework requirements; and students were told the study was about their opinions concerning appropriate behaviour within a relationship. Consent for data release was optional and obtained after the experiment. All participants received a link to a Qualtrics survey, which included four stages: demographics, vignettes, definitions (only given to those who reported knowing what gaslighting meant), and

an acceptance scale. The full questionnaire is available in Appendix F. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with a small sample ($n = 13$) to assess the clarity of the scenarios, accompanying questions, and overall questionnaire structure. No issues were identified during piloting, and participants reported that the materials were clear and easy to follow, so no modifications were made.

Vignette task. Participants were instructed to pay careful attention to the details of a story, as they would be quizzed on it afterwards. Participants were shown a short, written vignette that described an interaction between a fictional couple, ‘Tom and Jennifer’. In all vignettes Tom and Jennifer are in the kitchen cooking dinner, where they have a short conversation culminating in Tom saying that he would take the chicken out of the oven once it was ready. While Jennifer is setting the table, the chicken burns. An argument occurs over who is responsible. The eight vignette conditions differed across two levels of the three variables: repetition, intention, and victim response (see vignette variations in Table 4.2, and full examples of vignette in Appendix G). These conditions differed in whether the behaviour was intentional (i.e., whether Tom knew he was responsible or not), repeated (i.e., whether this behaviour happened frequently, or it was the first time), and victim response (i.e., whether Jennifer believed Tom, or whether she disbelieved him).

Having read the vignette, participants completed comprehension questions to assess their attention and understanding of the vignette. Then they were asked to rate the how acceptable they found the interaction, how serious, and whether they would feel the need to intervene if they had witnessed it. These ratings were made on a 6-point Likert scale. For example, one ranged between ‘not serious at all’ and ‘very serious’. Participants were also prompted to provide a free-response term that they believed best described the interaction in the vignette.

Table 4.2*Variations in Vignettes Across Conditions*

Variable	Variable Level	Vignette Alternatives
Repetition	Repeated	This isn't the first time that this type of argument has happened. Jennifer feels as if she has been accused of making these kinds of mistakes all the time, although she doesn't always remember making them.
	Once	This kind of thing has never happened before. Tom and Jennifer are usually on the same page and rarely get into arguments.
Intention	Intentional	Tom knows that he told Jennifer not to worry about the chicken, but he is feeling angry and embarrassed for forgetting.
	Not intentional	Tom swears that he remembers tasking Jennifer with overseeing the chicken.
Victim Response	Agrees	She thought she remembered being told not to worry about the chicken, but she figures she must have been mistaken. She figures that since Tom was so sure and she's clearly been so forgetful recently, it's likely that it was her fault. "I'm so sorry, Tom, I'm just so forgetful. I can't believe I've ruined our anniversary dinner".
	Disagrees	Jennifer is quite confused because she definitely remembers being told not to worry about the chicken. "What are you talking about Tom, you said you were going to take the chicken out of the oven". "No, I didn't, you just forgot as per usual" huffs Tom, as he throws the rest of the half-finished food into the bin. Jennifer bites her tongue and pauses to think.

After completion of these scales, participants were asked ‘*Do you know what gaslighting is?*’. Those who responded ‘yes’ then proceeded to the Gaslighting definition task. Those who said no, were taken straight to the Acceptability rating task.

Table 4.3

Gaslighting Definition Components Supplied to Participants.

Label	Description
<i>Behaviour</i>	Person A challenges Person B’s ability to perceive reality.
<i>Self-doubt outcome</i>	Person B begins to question their ability to perceive reality.
<i>Intention</i>	Person A’s behaviour towards Person B is intentional (i.e., intentionally causes Person B to question reality).
<i>Repetition</i>	Person A’s behaviour towards Person B is a pattern (i.e., repeated behaviour).
<i>Isolation</i>	Person A attempts to isolate Person B from other people and sources of information.
<i>Power</i>	Person A has some form of power (e.g., authority, financial, status) over Person B.
<i>Intimacy</i>	Person A and Person B are close to one another (e.g., partner, friend, family).
<i>Verbal abuse</i>	Person A makes comments that are hurtful to Person B.
<i>Emotional abuse</i>	Person A uses emotional manipulation to hurt Person B.
<i>Physical intimidation</i>	Person A uses physical intimidation to hurt Person B.
<i>Healthy listening</i>	Person A actively listens to Person B’s concerns.
<i>Supportive relationship</i>	Person B feels confident and supported in the relationship.
<i>Mutual affection</i>	Person A and Person B feel mutual affection.
<i>Other</i>	Other (please specify)

Note. Definitional components were presented in the order depicted in this table.

Gaslighting Definition Task. Participants who responded yes when asked if they knew what gaslighting is, were presented with a list of statements describing gaslighting components, including common definitional components, controversial ones, and some unrelated components to assess their attention. Participants were instructed to select all components that they believed were *necessary* for defining gaslighting (see Table 4.3 for the list of components). Following this, they were presented with the Acceptability rating task.

Acceptability Rating. In order to derive an acceptability rating, all participants were presented with the short Gaslighting Questionnaire developed by March et al., (2023) (see Appendix H). This scale consists of 10 behaviours associated with gaslighting, and participants were asked to rate the acceptability of each behaviour on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Unacceptable’ to ‘Acceptable’. The overall score was calculated by summing their responses across the 10 items, with a minimum possible score of 10 and maximum of 30.

Finally, following the Acceptability rating, participants were presented with a broad definition of gaslighting: “*Gaslighting can be broadly defined as a tactic of psychological manipulation in which an individual attempts to control their partner by convincing them that they do not have the ability to think, remember, and reason for themselves*”. They were then asked whether they believed gaslighting had occurred in the vignette, again using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

Results

A sensitivity analysis conducted using G*Power revealed that with 595 participants and 8 independent groups, the minimum detectable effect size at 80% power ($\alpha = .05$) was $f = 0.16$. Thus, the study was adequately powered to detect small-to-medium group differences.

The results are presented in three sections to address the three components of the research question: Section A (features that influence recognition of gaslighting), Section B (features included in definitions of gaslighting), and Section C (the impact of individual

attitudes towards gaslighting). Section A compares the mean scores of the four outcome measures (acceptability, seriousness, intervention, and whether it is gaslighting) across the different vignette conditions. It also reports the most common terms used by participants to describe the vignettes. Section B reports the frequency of component selection for the gaslighting definition across participants. Section C reports scores on the Gaslighting Questionnaire and their association with participants' recognition of gaslighting in the vignettes.

Section A – Recognition of Gaslighting

Table 4.4

Allocation of Participants to Eight Conditions, Varying Across Two Levels of Three Variables; Repetition (Repeated, Once), Intention (Intentional, Not Intentional), Victim Response (Victim Agrees, Victim Disagrees).

Condition	Repetition	Intention	Victim Response	n
1	Repeated	Intentional	Victim Agrees	86
2	Once	Intentional	Victim Agrees	85
3	Repeated	Not Intentional	Victim Agrees	90
4	Once	Not Intentional	Victim Agrees	79
5	Repeated	Intentional	Victim Disagrees	61
6	Once	Intentional	Victim Disagrees	72
7	Repeated	Not Intentional	Victim Disagrees	72
8	Once	Not Intentional	Victim Disagrees	69

The following section addresses the behavioural features that influence the recognition of gaslighting in the vignettes. Table 4.4 summarises the 3 different variables (repetition, intention, victim response) manipulated in the vignette task and the sample size associated with each condition

To examine the effects of the different vignette conditions, a separate 2 (repetition) x 2 (intention) x 2 (victim outcome) ANOVA was conducted for each of the four outcome scales (acceptability, seriousness, likelihood to intervene, and whether the vignette is gaslighting). Mean scores for each of these outcomes across the different conditions are depicted in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Descriptive Statistics of Vignette Outcomes Scales Across Conditions i.e., Mean (SD)

Condition	Acceptability	Seriousness	Intervene	Gaslighting
Repeated	1.76 (0.97)	4.54 (1.06)	4.74 (1.19)	5.40 (0.93)
Once	2.06 (0.96)	4.17 (1.08)	4.73 (1.23)	5.14 (1.10)
Intentional	1.74 (0.92)	4.44 (1.08)	4.74 (1.30)	5.39 (1.00)
Not intentional	2.07 (1.03)	4.27 (1.09)	4.73 (1.11)	5.15 (1.03)
Victim agrees	1.83 (1.00)	4.43 (1.10)	4.78 (1.22)	5.35 (1.02)
Victim disagrees	2.01 (0.99)	4.26 (1.06)	4.68 (1.19)	5.17 (1.02)
Total mean	1.91 (0.99)	4.35 (1.08)	4.74 (1.21)	5.27 (1.02)
Total mode	1.00	5.00	6.00	6.00

Note. all four measures are on a likert scale ranging from 1-6.

Acceptability. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects. As hypothesised (H2), vignettes in which the behaviour was repeated were rated as significantly less acceptable ($M = 1.76$) than those where the behaviour was a one-off ($M = 2.06$), $F(1,586) = 15.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Similarly, intentional behaviour was rated as less acceptable ($M = 1.74$) than unintentional behaviour ($M = 2.07$), $F(1,586) = 17.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Additionally, instances where the victim agreed with the gaslighter were rated as less acceptable ($M = 1.83$) than those where the victim disagreed ($M = 2.01$), $F(1,586) = 4.09$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. No significant interactions were found (all p values $> .05$).

Seriousness. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects. As hypothesised (H2), vignettes in which the behaviour was repeated were rated as significantly more serious ($M =$

4.54) than those where the behaviour was a one-off ($M = 4.17$), $F(1,586) = 20.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Similarly, intentional behaviour was rated as more serious ($M = 4.44$) than unintentional behaviour ($M = 4.27$), $F(1,586) = 5.01$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. However, contrary to H2, victim responses and interactions were not found to be significant (p values $> .05$)

Likelihood of Intervening. Contrary the hypothesis (H2), the ANOVA found no significant main effects or interactions for this outcome measure (all p values $> .05$).

Whether Gaslighting Occurred. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects. As hypothesised (H1), vignettes in which the behaviour was repeated were rated more strongly as gaslighting ($M = 5.40$) than those where the behaviour was a one-off ($M = 5.14$), $F(1,586) = 10.33$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$. Similarly, intentional behaviour was rated more strongly as gaslighting ($M = 5.39$) than unintentional behaviour ($M = 5.15$), $F(1,586) = 9.43$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$. Additionally, instances where the victim agreed with the gaslighter were rated more strongly as gaslighting ($M = 5.35$) than those where the victim disagreed ($M = 5.17$), $F(1,586) = 4.01$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. No significant interactions were found (all p values $> .05$)

Exploratory correlations, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction, were conducted to examine the effects of age and gender on ratings across the four scales (acceptability, seriousness, likelihood to intervene, and 'is it gaslighting'). After controlling for multiple comparisons, no significant correlations were found between age, gender, and the outcome scales (i.e., $p > .0125$).

It should be noted that, despite finding significant effects of the different behaviours on outcome scales, the effect sizes for all four ANOVAs were consistently small. One possible explanation is the reduced variability in the data, which may be due to ceiling and floor effects in the measures. Specifically, participants often selected the highest (or lowest) score on the Likert scales, limiting the range of responses (see Table 4.5). This restricted variability may have contributed to the smaller observed effect sizes.

Terminology Generated by Participants. Of the 595 respondents shown the vignettes, 522 indicated they could think of a term to describe the behaviour in the story. The frequency of terms mentioned are depicted in Table 4.6. As shown, gaslighting was the most commonly provided term, even before participants were introduced to the concept of gaslighting later in the survey.

Table 4.6

Terms Provided by Participants to Describe Behaviour in Vignettes.

Term	Count	% of Total
Gaslighting	339	63.0%
Manipulation	56	10.4%
Blame shifting/false accusations	33	6.1%
Verbal abuse	13	2.4%
Projecting	12	2.2%
Other	85	15.8%

Note. total count exceeds 522 because some respondents provided multiple terms.

Note. full list of terms in the 'other' category included in Appendix E.

Section B – Definitions of Gaslighting

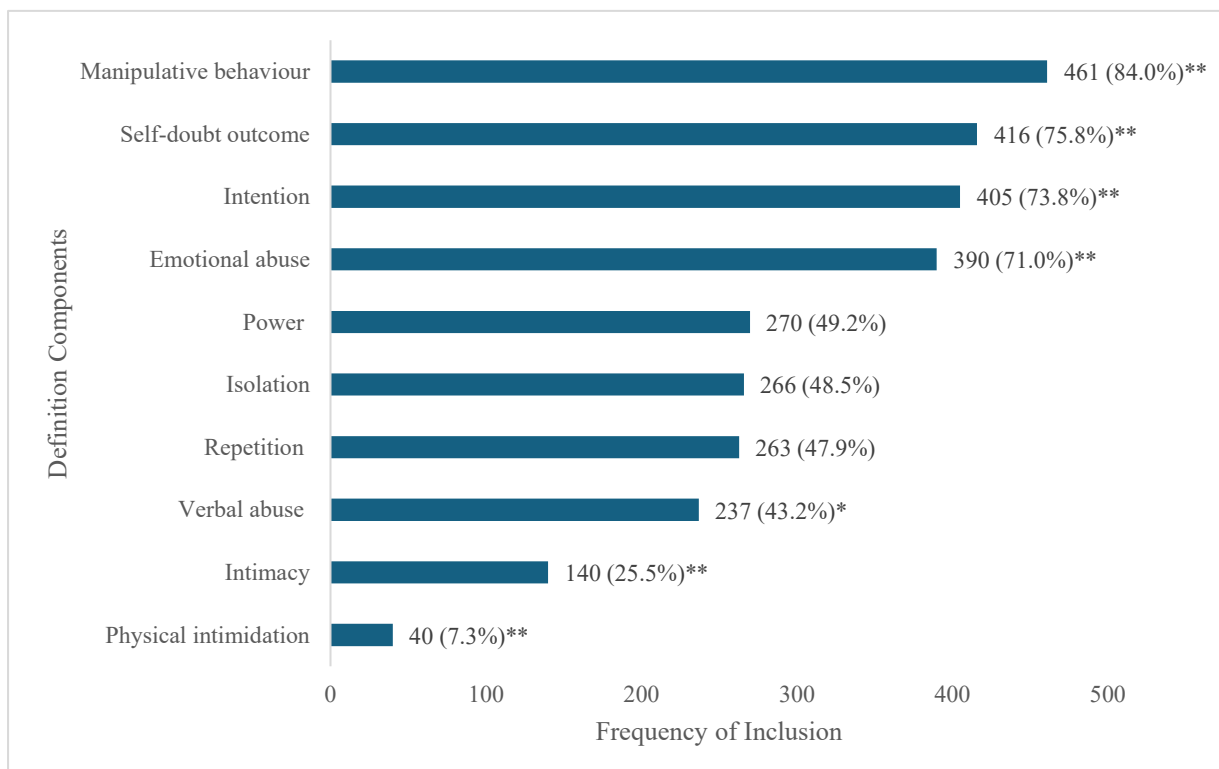
The following section addresses the criteria participants used to define gaslighting. Nearly all participants who completed the definitions task (n = 569) avoided selecting irrelevant definitional components (i.e., healthy listening, supportive relationship, mutual affection), demonstrating a high level of attention to the task. However, 20 participants selected irrelevant components, indicating a potential misunderstanding of the concept of gaslighting. As a result, these participants were excluded from the definitions analysis, resulting in a final sample of 549.

The irrelevant definition components (i.e., healthy listening, supportive relationship, mutual affection) were removed from further analysis and the remaining components were

tallied for frequency of selection (see Figure 4.1). The ‘Other’ component was also removed, as no participants selected this option. Further, even though the definitional components were presented in a fixed order (see Table 4.3) there was no apparent effect of order on elements chosen as indicated by the frequency of selection depicted in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1

Frequency of Definition Components Selected by Participants (n =549).



*Note. Frequency was compared using a two-tailed binomial test. Significant results are indicated with an asterisk: * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$.*

A series of two-tailed binomial tests were conducted on the remaining 10 components to determine whether the majority of respondents selected (or did not select) each component, i.e., the proportion of respondents was significantly greater than 50% (see results in Figure 4.1). To control for type I error due to multiple comparisons, the Bonferroni correction was applied to the critical alpha level, i.e., $.05/10 = 0.005$.

As hypothesised in H3, the majority of participants selected Manipulative Behaviour, Self-Doubt Outcome as necessary aspects of gaslighting. However, contrary to H3, Repetition

did not meet the threshold and did not differ significantly from 50%, showing participants were divided on Repetition.

Contrary to H4, Intention was selected by a majority of participants rather than the predicted 50/50 division.

As hypothesised in H5, Intimacy, Verbal Abuse, and Physical Intimidation were not selected by the majority of participants, suggesting these less essential. However, contrary to H5, Emotional Abuse was selected by the majority of participants as necessary to a definition. Further, contrary to H5, Isolation and Power Imbalance did not differ significantly from 50% despite being predicted to be chosen less frequently.

As the definitional components were provided to the participants after they had been shown the vignettes, correlations were conducted to check whether the condition participants were assigned to influenced their selection of definitional components. A weak positive correlation was found between participants in the repetition condition and the selection of repetition in the definition, $r(595) = .15, p < .001$. There was also a weak positive correlation between participants in the repetition condition and the selection of power imbalance in the definition, $r(595) = .12, p = .007$. No other definition components and vignette conditions were found to be correlated.

To explore whether gender influenced the inclusion of these factors, we conducted Bonferroni corrected Chi Squared tests for each. We found that for five of the nine factors reached significance, where women were more inclined to include these in their definitions than men (Emotional abuse, $\chi^2(549) = 16.80, p < .001$; Verbal abuse, $\chi^2(549) = 13.50, p = .001$; Repetition, $\chi^2(549) = 14.80, p < .001$; Power imbalance, $\chi^2(549) = 12.90, p = .002$; Physical intimidation, $\chi^2(549) = 7.06, p = .029$).

A similar series of exploratory Bonferroni corrected binomial logistical regressions revealed no effect of age on any factor.

Section C – Impact of Individual Attitudes Towards Gaslighting

The Gaslighting Questionnaire measured participants' acceptance of various gaslighting behaviours, with higher scores indicating greater acceptance (minimum = 10, maximum = 30). Participants' scores were negatively skewed, tending toward the minimum possible score, meaning that most participants rated none of the listed behaviours as acceptable ($M=11.6$, $SD= 2.58$, $Mode = 10$)

A partial correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between participants' Gaslighting Questionnaire scores and their responses to the four vignette outcome measures, while controlling for the vignette conditions.

As hypothesised in H6, a weak positive correlation was found between Gaslighting Questionnaire scores and ratings of acceptability in the vignette, $r(595) = .101$, $p = .014$. In contrast, weak negative correlations were observed between Gaslighting Questionnaire scores and ratings of seriousness, $r(595) = -0.144$, $p < .001$, likelihood of intervening, $r(595) = -0.093$, $p = .024$, and whether participants believed gaslighting had occurred, $r(595) = -0.159$, $p < .001$.

These results suggest that higher acceptance of gaslighting behaviours (as measured by the Gaslighting Questionnaire) was associated with viewing the vignettes as more acceptable, less serious, less important to intervene, and less likely to be gaslighting.

Exploratory Bonferroni corrected correlations were conducted to examine the effect of age and gender on Gaslighting Questionnaire scores, however, it was found that there was no significant effect of either (i.e., all $p > .025$).

Discussion

Public attitudes play a pivotal role in fostering cultural change towards covert forms of IPV (Sivarajasingam et al., 2022; Webster et al., 2018). Although gaslighting has become a widely discussed term, there is limited knowledge about public attitudes and perceptions regarding its role in IPV. This study aimed to investigate the characteristics that young adults

use to determine whether gaslighting has occurred. Specifically, it aimed to examine recognition and definitions of gaslighting, as well as how individual attitudes affects its recognition and acceptance.

Recognition of Gaslighting

It was found that vignettes where the behaviour was repeated, intentional, and resulted in characteristic outcomes (i.e., self-doubt) were rated more strongly as gaslighting compared to those where the behaviour was a one-off, unintentional, or met with resistance. The victim's outcome had the smallest effect on gaslight identification. Notably, all effects were relatively small, and all vignettes, even those lacking these components were largely rated as gaslighting or manipulation.

Ratings of the behaviours in the vignettes as acceptable, serious or requiring intervention led to somewhat differing patterns. When the vignette included repetition, intentional behaviour, or an outcome where the victim reacted by agreeing and experiencing self-doubt, participants rated it as less acceptable. However, as indicated by effect size, the influence of victim response on acceptability was relatively small. Repetition and intention also slightly increased the seriousness rating, although intention only impacted minimally, and the victim's outcome had no impact. Thus, it appears that, while repetition remains central to the recognition and perceptions of gaslighting, participants may not consider the victim's response essential to determining the behaviour's acceptability or seriousness. Additionally, the fact that intention played a moderate role in acceptability, but had little impact on seriousness suggests that participants may perceive intentional gaslighting actions as less morally acceptable but view the behaviour as serious regardless of the perpetrator's intent.

Contrary to predictions, none of the vignette conditions impacted participants' likelihood to intervene. However, it is important to note that all the vignettes received high ratings for likelihood of intervening regardless of the context. This does align with bystander

intervention literature which suggests that people feel more confident intervening in cases where there is low risk of physical violence, such as what was described in the vignettes (Fischer et al., 2011). Therefore, these results could indicate that participants felt equally prepared to intervene in any instance of gaslighting, regardless of severity as measured by recognition, seriousness, or acceptability, as the vignettes were perceived as low risk. Another consideration is the potential for social desirability bias in responses, as participants may be more inclined to report higher likelihood of intervening due to societal expectations, even though this may not necessarily reflect their real-world behaviour (Grimm, 2010). Additionally, while the vignette was intentionally set in a private setting to isolate the effects of specific behaviours on intervention decisions, it is possible that the context itself (e.g., a private dinner) may have influenced participants' likelihood to intervene. Without further probing questions, the motivations behind these ratings remain unclear.

Overall, these results suggest that while participants acknowledge repetition, intention, and victim response as relevant factors in recognising gaslighting, these elements do not have strong effects and do not prevent participants from identifying gaslighting in vignettes where these factors are absent. The small effect sizes observed may partially be due to measurement limitations, as responses remained on the most extreme end of the scale across conditions. However, it could also indicate that participants hold strong views on gaslighting across all vignettes, regardless of any nuance in the story. The participants may view all vignettes as serious examples of gaslighting, with only minor variations in perceived severity. Such an inclusive view of gaslighting could also explain the lack of variation in the participants' likelihood to intervene, as all vignettes are seen as gaslighting thus requiring intervention.

Definitions of Gaslighting

When asked to define necessary components of gaslighting, participants most often identified *manipulative behaviour (i.e., challenging someone's ability to perceive reality)*, *self-*

doubt outcome (i.e., questioning one's ability to perceive reality), *intention*, and *emotional abuse* as key. The inclusion of *manipulative behaviour* and *self-doubt outcome* was as expected (Darke et al., 2025b), suggesting that both groups view gaslighting as a dynamic involving attempts to manipulate a person's perception of reality, and the doubt and confusion that results. This diverges from definitions that focus on the manipulative behaviour alone (e.g., Berenstein, 2020) and is somewhat inconsistent with the IPV literature, where there is debate over whether the act of gaslighting is more central than its consequences (e.g., Hailes, 2022; Darke et al., 2025b). The participants' strong endorsement of *intention* contrasts with the controversial role of intention in prior literature (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Dorpat, 1996), and the more flexible view of intention within the victim-survivor samples. It does, however, align with support service providers' perspectives which also emphasised the deliberate nature of gaslighting (Darke et al., 2025b).

The emphasis on emotional abuse was unexpected as this was predicted to be relatively subsidiary factor, referencing acts of emotional abuse outside of gaslighting. In hindsight, it is likely that participants selected this item as they viewed gaslighting itself as a form of emotional abuse. Categorising gaslighting specifically as 'emotional abuse' is common within prior literature (e.g., Sodoma, 2022) although, there is debate as to whether it is best described as a psychological, emotional, or coercive form of abuse (e.g. Graves & Samp, 2021; Hailes, 2022). Our data suggests that the majority of participants viewed gaslighting as emotional abuse.

As predicted, *verbal abuse* and *physical intimidation* were selected infrequently, consistent with them being considered subsidiary aspects of gaslighting in victim-survivor definitions (Darke et al., 2025b). What is unclear, is whether participants viewed these components as less central to the definition of gaslighting or did not see their relevance at all. In IPV contexts, multiple forms of abuse, including verbal and physical intimidation, often play

an important role in reinforcing gaslighting. The participants may not have associated these forms of abuse as strongly with gaslighting, either because they are unaware of this connection or because they do not consider them *necessary* for inclusion in the definition. Alternatively, since the task did not require participants to define gaslighting exclusively within intimate partner contexts, their responses may reflect a broader understanding that can also apply to non-intimate relationships. This broader view may also help explain the unexpectedly low selection of *intimacy*. Intimacy was among the least frequently selected components, suggesting that participants do not necessarily view gaslighting as tied to intimate settings, diverging from conventional understandings. This more detached view may be influenced by the vagueness of how the term is used in popular culture (e.g., Verdier, 2019), or by the growing attention to gaslighting in non-traditional contexts, such as in the workplace or healthcare (e.g., Fraser, 2021).

Participants were divided as to whether *repetition*, *power imbalance*, and *isolation* were important features of gaslighting. Repetition is a key element of gaslighting in both victim-survivor definitions and prior literature (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2021). It is notable, then, that only half of the participant sample included it in their definitions. This may reflect the overuse or misuse of the term in public discourse, where gaslighting is sometimes applied loosely to one-off instances of dishonesty or miscommunication (e.g., Chrisp, 2019). Further, there was a trend observed in which women were more likely than men to include definitional components that describe the coercive patterns of behaviour inherent to gaslighting in IPV (i.e., *emotional and verbal abuse*, *physical intimidation*, *power imbalances*, and *repetition*). While it is not possible to determine the precise driving factors behind this finding, it appears that the women participants place greater emphasis on the underlying dynamics involved in psychological abuse. This could potentially be attributed to the higher prevalence of coercive control experienced by young women (Cunningham & Anderson, 2022).

Interestingly, participants who encountered repetition in the vignettes were more likely to incorporate both *repetition* and *power imbalance* into their definitions. This priming effect suggests a perceived connection between the two, with repetition potentially emphasizing the controlling dynamics inherent to gaslighting. Even so, *power imbalance* was also selected independently, indicating that some public conceptions of gaslighting remain closely tied to abuses of power. Another surprising finding was that *isolation* was selected as frequently as *repetition* and *power imbalances*. This is particularly notable if participants were defining gaslighting outside of an IPV context, as *isolation* is particularly relevant to intimate relationships and control. Its inclusion may reflect a broadening public understanding of coercive and controlling behaviours, with isolation recognised as a manipulative tool that can be used in both intimate and non-intimate contexts (e.g., Kukreja & Pandey, 2023).

Overall, the participants' selections of gaslighting components suggest a broad and evolving understanding of the term, one that may be influenced by both popular discourse and may change depending on context. The emphasis on outcome, intention, and emotional abuse presents an image of a highly manipulative and deliberate conception of gaslighting, and one that can occur in single instances across varied contexts. It appears that appreciation of the contextual factors that enable gaslighting, such as repetition, power, abuse, isolation, and intimacy is less stable within the participant sample. These findings suggest that gaslighting was not viewed as a form of intimate partner violence, but rather as a more flexible and widespread form of manipulation.

Impact of Individual Attitudes Towards Gaslighting

The Gaslighting Questionnaire (March et al., 2023) was intended to measure an individual's acceptance of common gaslighting behaviours. It was predicted that participants who rated gaslighting behaviours as more excusable in the questionnaire, would be less likely to recognise or condemn gaslighting in the vignettes. The findings largely aligned with these

predictions, indicating that participants with a higher normative acceptance of gaslighting behaviours rated the vignettes as more acceptable, less serious, felt less motivated to intervene, and were less likely to view the interaction as gaslighting. These findings indicate that individuals with greater tolerance for gaslighting may minimise or overlook gaslighting behaviours. Additionally, this tolerance may lead individuals to perceive gaslighting behaviours as less harmful, and potentially less problematic.

These findings suggest that individual beliefs or tolerance levels toward gaslighting may affect the likelihood to identify and respond to these behaviours, highlighting the value of gaslighting awareness and education in prevention efforts. Greater awareness of gaslighting's harmful effects could potentially reduce public tolerance, thereby reducing the likelihood of dismissing these behaviours and/or missing early signs of abuse. It is important to note though, that these effects were small, and most participants showed low acceptance of gaslighting in this study. As public attitudes towards abuse can vary across generations and communities (Klettke et al., 2015), it may be of benefit for future studies to assess the acceptance rates in diverse demographic groups.

While the nationality and ethnicity of these participants were highly varied, the age of the participants ran young due to the study being undertaken on an undergraduate student population. This is particularly relevant, given the prevalence of gaslighting discourse online, which may cause younger generations to be more familiar with the term. Factors like age, social media presence, and community exposure likely impact upon gaslighting awareness and acceptance. Expanding research to capture these demographic nuances may help inform the extent to which these attitudes interfere with gaslighting recognition and guide tailored awareness and intervention strategies across varied populations (Stanley et al., 2017).

Theoretical Implications

Definition vs Recognition.

When comparing responses of participants to explicit definitions of gaslighting and the recognition of gaslighting in the vignettes, some interesting and unexpected differences emerged. Responses to both tasks suggested that repetition and intention were important. Repetition significantly increased recognition of gaslighting in the vignettes although only half the participants felt it was central to a definition. It is not particularly surprising that manipulative behaviour, when repeated, is more strongly associated with gaslighting, as frequency and duration have been argued to play a key role in the recognition of psychological abuse (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000). Still, the reluctance to include repetition in the definition, and the fact that participants were more likely to include it after witnessing repetition in the vignettes, may suggest that there is a disconnect between how the public conceptually views gaslighting and how they recognise it in context. Intention was also a frequently selected component in participant definitions, and intentional acts in the vignettes were more readily identified as gaslighting. Even so, non-intentional vignettes in which the perpetrator clearly did not realise that they themselves had remembered the event wrong were still rated highly as instances of gaslighting.

The role of victim outcomes notably differed between definitions and recognition. *Self-doubt outcome*, i.e. whether a victim is effectively ‘gaslit’ and experiences the intended effects of the manipulation was considered by participants to be one of the defining characteristics of gaslighting, second only to the manipulative behaviour itself. However, when included in the vignettes, victim response (i.e., experiencing self-doubt) had the lowest impact suggesting that, in context, participants view the manipulative behaviour itself as the key factor.

These discrepancies bring to question what accounts for the gap between the conceptual beliefs and recognition of gaslighting behaviours. One potential explanation is that the students

hold a vague and flexible definition of gaslighting, one that can apply across various contexts and behaviours. As noted earlier, the term “gaslighting” has been used in ways that don’t always align with its traditional meaning, sometimes even diverging entirely from its original concept (Li & Samp, 2023). The definitional components most widely chosen by participants were *manipulative behaviour*, *self-doubt outcome*, *intention*, and the fact that it is *emotionally abusive*. These elements may be characteristic when considering gaslighting to be a broad behaviour that could occur in any context including one-off non-intentional miscommunication. While it is not necessarily always a negative thing that participants can adapt the definition to suit different contexts, it can also create a conceptual vagueness and conceptual creep that prevents it from being useful (Haslam, 2016; Medaris, 2024). A tendency to over-recognise gaslighting could potentially lead to misunderstandings about its severity and impact, as well as make it harder to identify and address genuine cases of abuse effectively.

Recognition vs Individual Attitudes

Together, the responses to the Gaslighting Questionnaire, and acceptability ratings from the vignettes reveal a general stance of condemnation toward gaslighting behaviours in the participant sample. Participants consistently found gaslighting unacceptable across the vignette conditions, aligning with questionnaire results in which most rated gaslighting behaviours as entirely unacceptable. This suggests that, overall, participants perceive gaslighting behaviours as broadly unacceptable, even without factors like repetition, intention, or negative effects on the victim.

However, participants’ willingness to condemn or intervene in gaslighting situations may stem more from their general attitude towards manipulative behaviours than from their recognition of gaslighting. While willingness to intervene was at ceiling in the vignette study, and consequentially no differences were observed across condition, individuals’ scores on the Gaslighting Questionnaire did predict their willingness to intervene. Additionally, their scores

also predicted whether participants recognised the vignette as gaslighting and how serious they viewed the behaviour. This suggests that awareness and education that addresses underlying beliefs about the acceptability of coercive and manipulative behaviours in relationships may help bridge the gap between attitude, recognition, and intervention.

Practical Implications

Public awareness and attitudes towards psychological abuse play important roles in the development of effective, long-lasting change. Improved public understanding can enhance the recognition of abuse by both victim-survivors and bystanders, improve screening and identification of warning signs in health settings, and dispel harmful myths and misunderstandings that may hinder help-seeking behaviours or lead to misconceptions in legal settings, such as among jurors (Webster et al., 2018; Ellison, 2019). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US advocate for multi-faceted approaches to domestic violence interventions that address various sectors, including individual attitudes, peer relationships, community advocacy, and policy changes (CDCP, 2024). Moreover, to achieve lasting attitude shifts, campaigns should be implemented over several years, tailored to specific behaviours and communities, and developed in consultation with the target population (Sivarajasingam et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2017).

In Australia, current domestic violence campaigns have faced criticism for failing to educate the public about more insidious forms of abuse and manipulation (Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, 2021). Further, by focusing primarily on helping victim-survivors recognise abuse and seek support, these campaigns may inadvertently place the burden on victim-survivors, rather than addressing the roles of perpetrators and societal attitudes that enable domestic violence (Webster et al., 2018). Campaigns that emphasise understanding manipulative and coercive behaviours, particularly how perpetrators can manipulate not just victim-survivors but also their communities, could more effectively hold perpetrators

accountable and encourage a broader cultural shift that views domestic violence as a societal problem (Meyer, 2018). Even within this vignette study, individual attitudes towards gaslighting influenced the tolerance of abusive behaviours, and willingness to intervene.

Addressing societal norms and attitudes towards IPV is necessary to reduce both tolerance and perpetration of abuse (Martín-Fernández et al., 2018). This study goes some way to reveal the beliefs and attitudes held by young adults concerning gaslighting. As the term is pervasive in public discourse, it is unsurprising that most study participants were familiar with it. However, they presented a view of gaslighting that is broad, flexible, and transcends intimate contexts. While this broad understanding may indicate that there is awareness about the use of gaslighting in settings such as the workplace or amongst peers, it could also dilute the perceived severity of gaslighting in IPV.

To improve public awareness, campaigns should target both individual and community attitudes using a multi-level approach, as outlined by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2024). These campaigns could include introducing educational programs in schools and tailored campaigns for specific communities, using real-life examples to highlight the warning signs, patterns, and facilitators of gaslighting. A key feature of gaslighting, as experienced by victim-survivors (Darke et al., 2025b), is repeated manipulation over time, often alongside subsidiary behaviours such as isolation, verbal and physical abuse, and coercive control, all which reinforce the manipulation. Incorporating these real-world examples into educational campaigns can help refocus public definitions, clarify its boundaries, and improve understanding of its severity.

A significant aspect of participants' definitions of gaslighting was the belief that it is intentional. While this aligns with some legal formulations, e.g., the recent NSW coercive control offences which define coercive control as an intentional pattern of behaviour, this focus on intent may not be the most effective for community recognition of gaslighting. Gaslighting

often obscures intent for both victim-survivors and bystanders, suggesting that campaigns may be more effective if the emphasis remains on patterns of behaviour rather than intent. This approach would provide actionable cues that help individuals recognise gaslighting in various contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provided insight into how students define and recognise gaslighting, it utilised a convenience sample, and therefore the findings may not represent the broader population. Students may be more familiar with the concept, especially since the term is frequently encountered in online spaces which tend to skew toward younger audiences. Additionally, rates of IPV are disproportionately high amongst this demographic (AIHW, 2024). However, we did not ask participants if they had personal experiences with IPV or gaslighting, which could have influenced their results. Despite this, given the high rates of IPV among young adults, understanding their views on psychological abuse remains important.

The role of gender in awareness and attitude towards psychological abuse also remains unclear, as there was only small gender-based differences observed in this study. The findings, however, suggests that future research efforts may benefit from exploring potential gaps in understanding of coercive and psychological abuse in men. A further limitation of the study is that we did not collect information on intersecting demographic factors that may influence perceptions of abuse (e.g., sexual orientation, cisgender identity, disability status), and future research should address this.

This study's use of a vignette design presents some limitations, primarily due to the lack of realism in presenting a single fictional story and then measuring variables such as intervention likelihood and perceived seriousness. This method may lead to overconfidence in participants' willingness to intervene, or heightened certainty that gaslighting has occurred given their access to written descriptions of the characters' thought processes. Further, it was

not assessed whether the participants found the vignettes realistic or convincing. More realistic investigations using videos or in person confederates could better simulate the subtle behaviours typical in a gaslighting cases. It would also be valuable to explore if it is possible to improve identification and bystander action in these more realistic cases.

Additionally, questions arose from participants responses that warrant further investigation. For instance, it would be valuable to include open ended questions to probe why participants included or excluded certain elements in their gaslighting definition, and how they differentiate between gaslighting and general lying or manipulation. Future studies could present vignettes without any gaslighting behaviours to assess whether participants overapply the term in unrelated situations, and whether education could reduce this effect. Lastly, as this study involved a relatively large sample, even small effects were statistically significant. Consequently, replication of these findings in other studies will increase confidence in their veracity. Overall, much remains to be understood about public attitudes towards this covert form of abuse and the effectiveness of education campaigns designed to address it.

Conclusion

This study explored the complexities of public understanding and recognition of gaslighting as a form of IPV, highlighting the ways in which the term's widespread use both facilitates awareness as well as reduces conceptual clarity. The findings indicate that while students' attitudes show a positive trend towards condemning gaslighting and its role as a form of emotional abuse, there are ambiguities in how the term is defined and recognised in context. These gaps underscore the need for educational campaigns and initiatives that not only raise awareness about the seriousness of gaslighting but also clarify its boundaries, patterns, and facilitating factors. A multi-level, targeted approach to public education could enable individuals to better identify gaslighting in various settings and improve the chances of bystander intervention. Targeted efforts in school and community campaigns that address more

covert and subtle forms of abuse may help promote a cultural shift that reduces the prevalence and acceptance of these behaviours.

Chapter 5: Cognitive Impacts of Gaslighting

Preamble

The content of this chapter is based on an article published in *Memory*.

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Abstract

The global introduction of coercive control laws addressing patterns of psychological abuse in intimate partner violence has made it increasingly important to understand the cognitive impacts of tactics like gaslighting. Gaslighting directly targets cognitive processes involved in evaluating memories, potentially undermining victim-survivors' recollection, confidence, and self-trust, which are critical in forensic processes such as testimony. This study examined the effects of partner-led challenges on autobiographical memories within close relationships (i.e., friends and couples). It adapted memory conformity paradigms to capture gaslighting dynamics, where one partner pressures the other to adopt a different recollection of shared events. The study assessed how this pressure influences recall, confidence, self-perception, and wellbeing. It also explored how relationship factors (e.g., closeness, length) predict changes in recall. Results showed pressure from close partners increased misinformation acceptance, emphasising the role of interpersonal dynamics in memory conformity and the potential for abusive partners to manipulate recollections. While recall confidence decreased, self-esteem and mood showed positive trends, indicating complex interactions in processing memory challenges. These findings highlight the need for further research into psychological manipulation's effect on memory and self-trust in IPV, with focus on improving forensic responses and interventions for victim-survivors of psychological abuse.

Introduction

With the recent introduction of coercive control laws in several countries across the world (e.g., EIGE, 2021, ANROWS, 2021), understanding the impacts of subtle psychological abuse tactics within intimate partner violence (IPV) has become increasingly important (Darke et al., 2025a). These criminal laws foreground patterns of behaviour, such as psychological manipulation and coercion, that can exert control over victim-survivors without necessarily involving physical violence (Stark, 2012), although pattern-based approaches have long existed in other jurisdictions (e.g., protection orders, stalking laws). Gaslighting is a particularly insidious form of psychological abuse that has been conceptualised as either a component of coercive control, or a tactic used alongside it to wear down resistance and autonomy (Relationships Victoria, n.d.; Hailes, 2022). It involves the manipulation of an individual's perception of reality by convincing them that their thoughts, beliefs, and memories are groundless, or 'crazy' (Abramson, 2014; Darke et al., 2025b).

While empirical studies are limited, theoretical work and observational accounts have identified recurring tactics central to gaslighting. These include persistent lying or denial (e.g., Stern, 2007), involving others in the deception (e.g., Sodoma, 2022), and leveraging trust or dependency (e.g., Abramson, 2014). These tactics involve manipulating and coercing individuals into misremembering events, as well as fostering distrust towards their own perceptual abilities. Initial survey studies suggest these effects are not only common, but also long lasting, impacting multiple domains such as memory, judgment, and emotions (Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Darke et al., 2025b).

The cognitive and psychological impacts of gaslighting have direct relevance to legal settings where memory manipulation and self-doubt can interfere with victim-survivors' ability to recount their experiences, respond to cross-examination or challenges of their account, and may influence their perceived credibility (Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Fitzgerald & Douglas,

2020). Consequently, further research is needed to explore how gaslighting between intimate partners affects memory and self-perceptions, in order to identify ways forensic systems can better support survivors of persistent psychological abuse. Further, as the relative credibility of victim-survivors and perpetrators plays a critical role in cases of interpersonal violence, especially those with limited physical evidence (Clark, 2010; Harsey & Freyd, 2020), it is crucial to understand how gaslighting tactics may foster undue distrust toward victim-survivors. While several areas of memory research speak to aspects of gaslighting, no prior work to date has directly examined deliberate memory manipulation within close relationships involving shared autobiographical experiences.

Misinformation Effect

It has long been established that memory is not perfect and is susceptible to manipulation. In eye-witness research, a variety of factors have been identified to influence memory accuracy in witnesses, ranging from individual differences in suggestibility to the phrasing of interview questions (Gardner, 1933) and this can result in false memories that are partially, or fully, fabricated (Wade et al., 2002; Johnston et al., 2023). For instance, Loftus and Palmer (1974) famously showed that participants who watched a film of a car crash gave higher speed estimates when the word “smashed” was used in the interview question, compared to the word “hit”. They were also more than twice as likely to recall broken glass, despite this not appearing in the original film. This phenomenon has come to be known as the ‘misinformation effect’ (Loftus & Hoffman, 1989) and raises an important question about the broader relationship between memory and belief.

Researchers have investigated a variety of internal and external factors that make witnesses more susceptible to misinformation. Internal misinformation can come from both personal and situational factors, such as mood at the time of event (Storbeck & Clore, 2011), biases and stereotypes (Loftus & Davis, 2006), or the amount of time between experiencing

the event and retrieval (Odinot & Wolters, 2006). For instance, the amount of stress a witness experiences has been found to have a complex relationship with memory, affecting both the level of focus and the type of detail attended to (Eisen et al., 2002, Dilevski et al., 2020).

Individual differences have also been investigated, although there is less evidence and consistency in these findings. For instance, a few individual factors have been argued to increase to the likelihood of adults accepting misinformation, such as low confidence or memory distrust (Mojtahedi et al., 2017; Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986); high trait and state anxiety (Gudjonsson, 1988; Gudjonsson et al., 1995); low mood or depression (MacFarland & Morris, 1998); external locus of control (Douglass et al., 2019); and varied personality traits (Eisen et al., 2002; Nurmoja & Bachmann, 2008). There have also been a few studies in other related traits that can play an important role in the context of IPV and trauma, such as dissociation (Raymond, 2022), self-esteem (Drake et al., 2010), and attachment style (Weider & Terhune, 2019). Although, it is important to note that the research on all these individual differences has produced highly mixed findings.

While there are either preliminary or complex findings concerning internal sources of misinformation, research on external sources of misinformation has been more consistent. Witnesses can encounter external misinformation through media reports, co-witness discussion, and various procedures involved in the forensic process (Davis & Loftus, 2007). A significant amount of research on adult suggestibility has focused on 'interrogative suggestibility' (i.e., how interview methods can render people more suggestible). Many external factors have been found to increase the suggestibility of interviewees, such as intonation (Gubi-Kelm & Schmidt, 2018), negative feedback (Baxter et al., 2013), and assertiveness (Gudjonsson, 1988). While many of these studies were designed to focus solely on eyewitness memory and how it is influenced during the various stages of the judicial

process, the findings raise an important question about the broader relationship between memory and belief.

Memory and Belief

Brewer (1996) defined autobiographical memory as consisting of three elements: detailed imagery of the event (recollection), belief that the event has occurred, and belief that the recollection is accurate. Scoboria and colleagues argue that there is a dichotomy between false beliefs and false memories, suggesting that memory for an event, and belief in that memory, are distinct constructs (Scoboria et al., 2004; Scoboria et al., 2017). That is, it is possible to have a vivid recollection of an event, without believing in it (i.e., a non-believed memory; Otgaar et al., 2012). Conversely, it is also possible to have a strong belief in a memory, of which you have no recollection (Otgaar et al., 2017).

Scoboria and colleagues' (2004) nested model of false beliefs and false memories proposed that memory for an event is qualified by the belief that the event happened. This belief, in turn, is qualified by its personal plausibility, which is then qualified by its general plausibility. This model is part of a growing body of research that shows individuals are consistently engaging with their surroundings to validate their own memories (Wade et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2015, van Golde et al., 2010). Importantly, people who distrust their own memories have been shown to be more likely to incorporate misinformation (e.g., van Bergen et al., 2010b) and demonstrate a weaker connection between recollection and belief (Zhang et al., 2024). This raises important questions about how individuals negotiate conflicting recollections and navigate memory and belief in response to being directly challenged within relationships.

Memory Conformity

It is well established within memory conformity literature that witnesses can incorporate memory details from other witnesses into their own recollection (Gabbert et al.,

2004). Despite initially remembering the event differently, after discussion, their memories become more similar. Such memory conformity is more likely if individuals are taking on additional information (i.e., non-observed details; Gabbert et al., 2006), when the suggestion is repeated (Azad et al., 2022), or when they believe their partner had viewed the scene for longer (Gabbert et al., 2006; Gabbert et al., 2007). In general, individuals are more likely to adopt someone else's memory when they believe that person's recollection is more accurate (e.g., Allan, et al., 2012; Monds et al., 2019; Hart & Meade, 2021).

It is apparent that individuals rely on a variety of internal and external cues to evaluate the accuracy of their own memory relative to others. These cues include internal sources of misinformation, such as beliefs/attitudes, plausibility, memory decay, confidence, and stress, as well as external sources such as question phrasing, negative feedback, and new information from a co-witness. Wright et al. (2010) proposed that memory conformity arises through two key processes: normative and informational influence. Drawing on Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) distinction, they argued that people may conform to others' memories either due to social costs associated with disagreement (normative) or because they believe others' memories are more accurate (informational). Memory conformity research has assessed these influences on how people alter their memories during public settings, such as group discussions, with follow-up testing conducted in private.

For example, Oeberst and Seidemann (2014) found that memory changes introduced by close partners persisted even in participants' private accounts and interpreted this as evidence that the influence behind this conformity in private recall was informational rather than normative. Their reasoning, and much of how normative influence is operationalised in memory conformity research (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2012), was that normative pressure requires the immediate presence of others to be active and thus would not shape private recall. However, this view may not fully account for the complexities of close relationships and IPV. In real life

situations, particularly within the context of IPV, it is possible that the cost of disagreeing can shape how individuals believe or recall events, even when they're not influenced by that partner in the moment of recall. In real-life contexts, particularly involving intimate partners, individuals may internalise social pressures, even in the absence of their partner.

For instance, several studies suggest that social closeness amplifies conformity. Research has demonstrated that people are more likely to adopt partial false memories from romantic partner or close friends than from strangers (Hope et al., 2008; French et al., 2008). French and colleagues (2008) found that intimate pairs reported increased confidence in their memories following discussion, even for details they had not personally witnessed. Similarly, Condon and colleagues (2015) found that higher levels of trust and familiarity were associated with stronger conformity effects. These studies suggest that intimacy and emotional investment may heighten the motivation to align memories, even during private recollections, whether due to informational belief or the subtle ongoing social costs of disagreement. Notably, however, these studies did not manipulate normative pressure directly. This is important, as the question remains of how intimate partner dynamics influence private recollection, especially in relationships characterised by power imbalance, fear, or conflict.

It is reasonable that most prior memory conformity research does not include explicit pressure, as most people who co-witness an event are trying to reach agreement, not manipulate one another. However, to understand the effects of more explicit pressure on private recollection, Otgaar et al., (2016) found that when an experimenter denied the occurrence of a witnessed event, participants' memory for the event remained intact, but their belief in its occurrence significantly decreased (i.e., a non-believed memory). However, this effect did not hold true if the denial came from a peer confederate. This suggests that external pressure from perceived authority (i.e., the experimenter) can reduce memory belief, not only affecting public reports but internal beliefs tested for in private.

A limitation of the study by Otgaar et al., (2016) and other memory conformity studies is the reliance on video stimuli viewed in laboratory settings, rather than autobiographical memories. Harris et al., (2017) addressed this limitation by altering recounts of recent autobiographical events. In the laboratory, confederates would describe participants' recent experiences back to them while inserting two new details. Interestingly, one-third of participants adopted at least one of the suggested details when writing about the memory afterwards in private. However, as with Otgaar et al., (2016), this study focused on memory changes introduced by strangers rather than close partners. At present it remains unclear to what extent individuals adopt autobiographical memory changes from a close partner, especially under conditions of social pressure.

Study Aims

The concepts of misinformation, memory, belief, and memory conformity have largely been studied within an eyewitness context, but their implications are far reaching. The process of evaluating internal and external sources in memory construction, particularly with deferral to intimate partners, has important implications for how individuals' reality test within relationships. Given the important role of memory challenges in gaslighting, understanding how memory and belief are impacted when partners disagree may provide valuable insights into the gaslighting process. Specifically, it is important to understand individual outcomes when partners not only disagree but also refuse to collaboratively negotiate their recollections on shared autobiographical events.

The present study builds on prior memory research by modifying memory conformity paradigms to better reflect the experience of memory challenges within close relationships. First, it examined autobiographical memories shared between friends and romantic couples, providing more naturalistic stimuli than typically examined in memory conformity experiments. Second, this study used free recall, which better approximates how individuals

reflect upon and report lived experience in social and legal contexts. The prior mentioned memory conformity studies between close partners, with the exception of Hope et al., (2008), relied on recognition tasks, limiting their ecological validity. Third, by incorporating normative pressure/motivation (i.e., a partner actively pushing for agreement) and informational motivations (i.e., a partner claiming to have knowledge of how the event really occurred), this study provided a richer representation of the social dynamics influencing memory conformity between partners in cases of gaslighting.

Given that gaslighting affects wellbeing (i.e., mood, confidence; Hailes & Goodman, 2023) and self-perception (i.e., self-esteem, memory trust; Bhatti et al., 2021), it is important to investigate the role of these memory challenges, not only on memory, but also on these relevant outcomes. Further, as there has been limited research into couples and memory conformity, prior studies have not investigated whether individual-level factors play a role in the way couples negotiate misinformation. For instance, individual differences that have been suggested to play a role in suggestibility (e.g., high anxiety, external locus of control, high dissociation, low self-esteem, memory distrust, depression/low mood, anxious attachment, agreeableness) have also been described as outcomes and reinforcers of gaslighting. However, prior research has produced inconsistent results regarding the influence of these factors on susceptibility to misinformation and suggestion (Raymond, 2022). The extent to which these factors influence memory conformity within close relationships remains unclear, making this an exploratory component of the study.

Research Questions and Design

This study addressed the question: what are the effects of memory challenges from a close partner on recall, confidence, mood, and self-perception? To investigate this, close partners engaged in an exercise where shared memories were altered, with one partner attempting to convince the other of these changes. Recall was analysed for pre-post changes in

the content and confidence of participant responses. Impacts on self-perception and wellbeing were assessed by examining shifts in mood, self-esteem and memory distrust. Changes in participants' perceptions of their partner's memory reliability were also examined. Additionally, the previously mentioned individual differences were analysed to assess their potential influence on memory outcomes. Finally, relationship dynamics, such as relationship type, length, closeness, and gender composition, were explored for their possible influence on memory outcomes.

Contributions

Through these aims, this research sought to provide a comprehensive, first insight into how partner-induced memory challenges affect various cognitive and interpersonal facets. Given that no known paradigm has investigated memory conformity between partners regarding shared autobiographical memories, where one partner knowingly attempts to convince the other, predictions were guided by broader memory conformity and false memory literature.

Pre-Post Hypotheses

Recall and Confidence. Prior research on memory conformity suggests that people rely on others to validate memories (e.g., Hart & Meade, 2021) and are particularly likely to conform with close partners (e.g., Condon et al., 2015). Therefore, it was predicted that participants would incorporate the misinformation introduced by their partners into their post-discussion written accounts. Further, partner challenges were predicted to increase uncertainty in participants' beliefs, as indicated through the omission of debated details, reduced confidence ratings in the memory accuracy, and increased use of written indicators of uncertainty following the memory challenges.

Perception of Memory. Related to confidence in the written memory, the study also investigated whether exposure to misinformation affects how participants perceive their own

and their partner's memory reliability. While this dynamic has not been directly studied within a partner-based memory conformity paradigm previously, findings from research on gaslighting in IPV (e.g., Hailes & Goodman, 2023) and the effects of normative pressure on belief in laboratory settings (Otgaar et al., 2016) suggest that participants are likely to experience increased memory distrust following challenges to their recollection. However, the effects of misinformation, and pressure to conform, on perceptions of the partner's memory remain exploratory, as no prior studies have investigated these specific interactions.

Wellbeing: Mood and Self-Esteem. The gaslighting literature indicates that memory challenges can significantly impact self-perception and wellbeing. Specifically, gaslighting has been described as negatively affecting self-esteem (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). Consequently, it was predicted that exposure to a partner's persistent challenges would result in a decrease in a self-esteem measure. Further, active contradiction by a partner who will not compromise was also expected to result in a decrease in mood.

Predictive Hypotheses

Individual-Level Differences. Findings from false memory studies indicate that individual differences such as personality, locus of control, dissociation, anxiety, and self-confidence play roles in suggestibility (e.g., Douglass et al., 2019; Eisen et al., 2002). These internal influences on susceptibility to misinformation are not well-established relative to external influences and, also, have not been tested within close relationships. Further, other potentially relevant internal factors, such as attachment style, have not been investigated in relation to memory conformity. As a result, hypotheses concerning the potential impact of these individual differences on susceptibility to misinformation from partners were exploratory.

Relationship-Level Differences. As studies on memory conformity have demonstrated that social relationships can impact the likelihood of accepting misinformation (Hope et al., 2008; French et al., 2008), it was predicted that differences in relationship characteristics, such

as relationship length, self-reported closeness, and relationship composition (e.g., friends/couples, gender combination) would significantly impact misinformation acceptance. Specifically, relationships that were more intimate (e.g., romantic couples, longer length, reported closer) were predicted to result in greater misinformation acceptance. Further, the impact of gender composition was purely exploratory.

Transparency and Openness

Preregistration, de-identified data, analysis output, and materials are available on Open Science Framework: osf.io/pkv76. Due to the identifiable nature of the written autobiographical memory accounts, they have not been made available. This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2021/659) on December 14, 2021.

Method

Design

This study employed a within-subject repeated-measures design to examine changes in participants' memory accuracy and belief following exposure to memory challenges presented by their partner. Additionally, it assessed changes in wellbeing and self-perception. Participants completed the experiment in pairs, with one participant randomly allocated to provide the misinformation while the other was allocated to receive misinformation. Trait-based measures and relationship characteristics were also examined to evaluate their potential impact on memory accuracy, confidence, wellbeing, and self-perception.

Participants and Recruitment

Sample Size Determination

A power analysis was conducted using G*Power for a repeated-measures design with within-subject factors, measured twice. Given the need for multiple analyses, a conservative alpha level of 0.01 was selected to minimize the risk of Type I error. The analysis assumed a

small effect size ($f = 0.25$), with power set to 0.95, numerator degrees of freedom = 1, and a single group. This resulted in a recommended minimum sample size of 80 couples. However, to allow for potential data loss from issues such as technical difficulties or participant withdrawal, a 20% attrition rate was anticipated, increasing the target sample size to 100 couples (200 participants).

Participants

Table 5.1

Demographics of Individual Participants

Characteristics		<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i> (range)	<i>SD</i>
Gender	Women	119	70.0%		
	Men	51	30.0%		
Age				19.6 (18 – 42)	2.95
Ethnicity (Single or Multiple)	Single	110	64.7%		
	Multiple	60	35.3%		
Ethnicity (Frequency of Selection)	Australian	89	36.8%		
	Asian	82	33.9%		
	European	48	19.8%		
	Middle Eastern	10	4.1%		
	African	5	2.1%		
	North American	4	1.7%		
	Pacific Islands/ Oceania	4	1.7%		

Note. Frequency of selection exceeds total participants, as it accounts for multiple ethnicity selections

Participant pairs (friends and romantic couples) were recruited from the undergraduate student participant pool at the University of Sydney. Participants included both university students and non-students, as university participants were allowed to bring their non-student partners with them. Eligibility criteria required participants to have known their partner for at

least six months and to be fluent in English. 110 pairs initially took part, but 25 pairs were excluded from the final analysis due to non-serious attempts (e.g., failing attention checks, incomplete responses, or if the misinformation provider failed to bring up any of the target memory changes during the exercise). In total, 170 people (119 women, 51 men) participated, and were tested in pairs ($N = 85$), which included both friend pairs and romantic couples (see Table 5.1 for detailed demographics, and Table 5.2 for descriptives of dyads). Students received course credit as reimbursement for participation, while their non-student partners were entered into a raffle to win one of three \$50 gift cards.

Table 5.2

Demographics and Characteristics of Partners

Characteristics		<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i> (years)	Range (years)	<i>SD</i>
Relationship Type	Friends	66	77.6%			
	Romantic Couple	19	22.4%			
Relationship Length				4.3	0.5 – 13.8	3.9
Gender Composition	Both Women	42	49.4%			
	Both Men	8	9.4%			
	Men/Women	35	41.2%			

Materials and Measures

All questionnaires were hosted on Qualtrics, and were completed on the participants own devices during the first session, and on laboratory desktop computers during the second session.

There were four attention checks included in the surveys across session 1 and 2. These were simply questions embedded into questionnaires that said, ‘please select X response to show you’re paying attention’.

Memory Questionnaire

The memory questionnaire instructs participant to write down everything they can recall from four events, and rate how confident they felt that their written account was accurate (i.e., between 0-100%). See both session 1 and 2 version of questionnaire in Appendix I.

Self-Report Scales

The questionnaires provided across the two sessions included several scales (see Figure 5.2 for the measurement order across sessions).

Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21)

The DASS-21 is a 21-item self-report questionnaire that is designed to measure symptoms associated with three subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Each item is rated on a 4-point likert scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me most of the time), with higher scores indicating more severe symptoms. The score for each subscale is calculated by summing together the scores for the relevant items, and multiplied by 2 to align with the original DASS-42 score guide. The DASS-21 has good internal reliability across all three of the subscales (Henry & Crawford, 2005), test-retest reliability (Antony et al., 1998) and construct validity with other related depression and anxiety scales (Sukantarat et al., 2007).

International Personality Item Pool - Short Form (IPIP-50)

The 50-item version of the IPIP is a short form of the original 100-item IPIP, a self-report questionnaire designed to measure the five major personality factors: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Golberg et al., 2006). Participants rate how accurately each item describes them on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'very inaccurate' to 'very accurate'. Each of the five factors include 10 items, with scores ranging from 10 to 50 for each factor. Higher scores indicate greater levels of the respective

personality traits (e.g., higher openness or conscientious). The IPIP-50 has been found to exhibit high levels of internal and test-retest reliability (Ypofanti et al., 2015).

Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES-II)

The DES-II is a 28-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure dissociative experiences across three sub-scales: Amnesia, Depersonalisation/Derealization, and Absorption (Carlson & Putnam, 1993). Participants rate each item from 0% to 100% indicating the percentage of time they experience each dissociative symptom, with higher scores indicating greater dissociation. There has been evidence suggesting that the three sub-scales are not clearly distinct, therefore, a combined total score across all items is often considered more reliable (van IJzendoorn & Schuengel, 1996). The DES-II demonstrates high test-retest reliability (Arzoumanian et al., 2023) and has established norms for both clinical and non-clinical populations (van IJzendoorn & Schuengel, 1996).

Experience in Close Relationship Scale - Short Form (ECR-S)

The ECR-S is a 12-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure attachment styles in close relationships, including two subscales: avoidance and anxiety (Wei et al., 2007). Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree), resulting in an overall score between 7 and 42 for each subscale. Higher scores on either or both scales indicate a less secure attachment style. Both subscales of the ECR-s have demonstrated high internal consistency and acceptable test-retest reliability (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2007).

Internal Control Index (ICI)

The ICI is a 28-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure internal-external locus of control (Duttweiler, 1984). Participants rate how often they experience each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'rarely' (less than 10% of the time) to 'usually' (more than 90% of the time). The total score ranges from 28 to 140, with higher scores indicating more

internal locus of control. The ICI has been found to have good internal reliability and measures a single factor, which contrasts other common locus of control scales (Jacobs, 1993).

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

The PANAS is a 20-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure state-based positive and negative affect. Participants are presented with different feelings and rate the strength of each on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). The PANAS includes two sub-scales, positive and negative affect, each with 10 items, resulting in scores ranging from 10 to 50 for each sub-scale. Higher scores on the sub-scales indicates greater levels of positive or negative affect. The PANAS has consistently demonstrated good internal reliability (Mertz et al., 2013; Heubeck & Wilkinson, 2019). Further, as a state-based measure, the PANAS can capture momentary changes in affect and can be administered before and after an activity to assess the impact.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is a 10-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The items present statements regarding the participant's self-perceived competence and likability. Participants rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater levels of self-esteem. The RSES has demonstrated high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

Squire Subjective Memory Questionnaire (SSMQ)

The SSMQ is an 18-point self-report questionnaire designed to measure the extent to which individuals experience distrust of their memory (Squire et al., 1979). Items consist of statements about participants' memory abilities, which they rate on an 8-point Likert scale ranging from -4 (worse than ever before) to 4 (better than ever before). Participants receive an overall score ranging from -72 to 72, with negative scores indicting higher levels of memory

distrust. The SSMQ has shown to measure one single dimension of subjective memory distrust and has good internal consistency (van Bergen et al., 2010a).

Squire Subjective Memory Questionnaire – Partner (SSMQ – Partner)

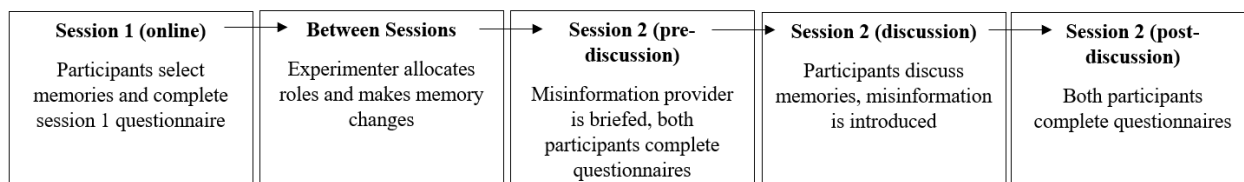
An adapted version of the SSMQ was developed for this study to measure participants' trust in their partner's memory. This version retains the original structure of the SSMQ, but participants are instructed to answer on behalf of their partner instead of themselves. Items are rephrased from 'my ability' to 'their ability'. Otherwise, the items and scoring remain the same.

Procedure

The study took place over two sessions conducted one-week apart. The order of events is depicted in Figure 5.1, and order of measures in Figure 5.2. Participants were told that the study examined how couples and close friends remember shared events both collaboratively and individually, with a focus on personality and interpersonal connection.

Figure 5.1

Order of Events Across Sessions



Session 1 (Online)

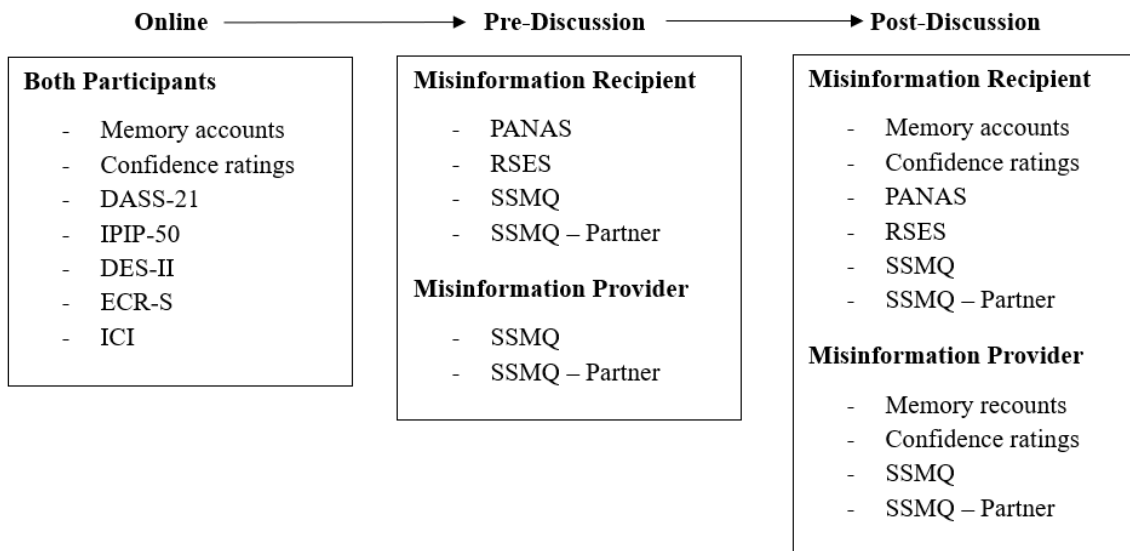
The participants first met with the experimenter in an online video call. Together, participants were required to select four events from a list that they had experienced together and were willing to discuss during the experiment. The list included common shared experiences such as '*the first time you met,*' or '*the most recent outing together*' (see full list of options in the memory questionnaires included in Appendix I).

Participants were instructed to jointly select four events without discussing them in detail. Then once they had selected the events, they were asked to independently fill out the

session 1 questionnaire online. The questionnaire requested basic demographic information, including age, gender, ethnicity, English fluency, relationship type and length, and how well they feel they know their partner. It then introduces the memory questionnaire which asks participants to recount their recollections. Once both participants had finished the survey, they were instructed to avoid discussing these specific memories together until the in-person session.

Figure 5.2

Order of Measures Across Sessions



Preparation Between Sessions

There was approximately one week (between 6-8 days) between session 1 and session 2 for each pair. During this week, the experimenter randomly allocated one member of the pair to provide the misinformation (misinformation provider), and the other to receive the misinformation (misinformation recipient) during the second session.

The experimenter read through the written accounts and pulled out two details to be altered (one central detail, one peripheral detail) from two of the four memories (i.e., four changes in total). Details chosen were highly varied, as the memories were idiosyncratic, and

details were dependent upon the type of information provided by the participants in the first session. Central details included elements that were key parts of the memory, such as the cuisine eaten, people present, or the method of transport used. Peripheral details were less key to the memory, such as the colour of one of their outfits or how much food was consumed. The other two memories remained unaltered, so as to avoid suspicion during the in-person memory discussion.

Session 2 (In-Person)

Both participants arrived and were told that they would be required to complete a pre-discussion questionnaire, have a joint discussion, then complete another questionnaire at the end.

Pre-Discussion Questionnaire Completion and Role Briefing. Participants were sent to separate booths to complete self-report scales. The participant that was assigned to be the misinformation recipient completed their version of the scales, which included the PANAS, RSES, SSMQ, and SSMQ-partner, so their scores could be compared before and after the joint discussion.

While this was happening, the participant who was allocated to provide the misinformation was privately briefed. They were shown the changes that the experimenter selected during the week and were instructed to convince their partner during the upcoming discussion that these changes were the truth. They were told explicitly that if the partner disagreed with them, they should insist it was true and refuse to concede the point. Afterwards, they were given time to read through the changes to become familiar with them and were also required to complete their version of the self-report scales which only included the SSMQ and SSMQ-Partner.

Memory Discussion. Once both participants had completed their respective questionnaires, they were brought together into the same room. They were requested to recount

everything they remembered about the four events they chose in session 1, in as much detail as they could. All participants discussed the four events in ascending order (i.e., 1-4), however, which two events were altered varied between pairs. Both participants were provided sheets that had prompts to remind them of the events they chose in the first session, however the prompts differed slightly. The misinformation recipient only had brief descriptions of the events (e.g., ‘the most recent time you had dinner together’), while the misinformation provider had these as well as the central and peripheral changes added in light grey dot points under each memory prompt, to assist them in recalling the required changes. The exchange was videotaped to keep a record of whether the changes were introduced in full. Once the participants felt they had adequately discussed all they could recall about the four events, the experimenter sent them back to their private booths.

Post-Discussion Questionnaire Completion. In their separate booths, participants completed the memory questionnaire again, in which they wrote about the events in detail and rated confidence. Both participants were also required to answer the same scales they completed prior to the exercises again, for comparison. That is, the misinformation recipients completed the PANAS, RSES, SSMQ, and the SSMQ Partner. The misinformation providers completed the SSMQ and the SSMQ Partner.

Debriefing. Due to the potentially distressing nature of the study participants were individually debriefed by the experimenter in a private room after completing the questionnaires, both verbally and in writing. They were informed of the true aims of the study, the experimental manipulations involved, and the specific instances of misinformation that had been introduced. The written debriefing form contained information about university counselling services and IPV-specific support hotlines, in case the study reminded them of personal experiences, or they required additional support.

Data Preparation

Given that the way in which false memories (and beliefs) are coded have been subjected to debate in recent years (Wade et al., 2018; Wade et al., 2025), there has been increasing push in false memory literature to include multiple indices of memory consistency (Murphy & Greene, 2025). As such, a coding manual was developed for the written memory accounts to assess changes and omissions between time 1 and time 2, as well as indicators of uncertainty. The following section outlines each coding category. The complete coding manual can be found in Appendix J.

Memory Coding: Misinformation Codes

Memory Changes. The misinformation recipient participants' written accounts were coded for the inclusion of the target central and peripheral changes. Specifically, this involved identifying whether any central or peripheral changes made by the experimenter were present in the participant's recall at time 2. However, if a participant wrote that they noticed the misinformation came up in conversation, but they were not sure if it was true, it was instead coded under the indications of uncertainty section below.

Memory Omissions. The participants' written accounts were also coded for the omission of the target central and peripheral details. That is, instead of sticking with the original version of these details or taking on the changed version, participants omitted the detail entirely. Omission of the detail is relevant, as choosing to exclude the detail after receiving misinformation about it can be an indication of uncertainty (Otgaar et al., 2010).

Memory Coding: Uncertainty Codes

Hedge Words. Hedge words are used to indicate uncertainty and probability, for example "I think", "maybe", "possibly", "roughly" (Liu & Fox Tree, 2012). The written accounts were coded for the number of hedge words used in time 1 and time 2. As there may be individual differences in the number of hedge words used in written accounts, the difference

between the two accounts was used to indicate an increase or decrease in hedge words after the misinformation.

Grain Size. Grain size refers to the level of precision in a statement, with specific detail indicating a smaller (precise) grain size, and broader detail indicating a higher (coarse) grain size (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2008). Individuals are thought to increase grain size, becoming vaguer in their description, to avoid being incorrect and to account for uncertainty (Goldsmith et al., 2002). Therefore, written accounts were coded for each time the target peripheral or central change increased in grain size from the time 1 account. For example, in time 1 the participant noted that the event occurred at 10am (precise), whereas in time 2 they noted that it occurred in the morning (coarse).

Incompatible Alternatives. In addition, the memory accounts were coded for incompatible alternatives, which refers to the presence of two alternatives that cannot coexist (Luna & Albuquerque, 2020). Incompatible alternatives were only coded in sentences relevant to the target changes. For example, if the original detail was ‘10am’ and the changed detail was ‘1pm’, an incompatible alternative could be a statement like “it was either morning or afternoon”, since it included both the original detail and the changed detail, but both cannot be true simultaneously.

Explicit Mention of Not Remembering. Instances where participants explicitly indicated that they did not remember the target detail were also coded. Such instances were particularly notable because the changed details were directly derived from their initial written account. If, in time 2, they revised their written response to say they did not remember after the discussion with their partner, this may reflect uncertainty after the discussion.

‘Noticing’ the Target Changes. Instances where participants wrote that they recognised that their partner remembered the target detail differently were coded in two ways. First, if participants noticed the change and accepted it, it was coded as ‘noticing the change –

accepting’. For example, ‘my partner said it was the afternoon, so we must have met then’. Second, if participants noticed the change and did not accept it, it was coded as ‘noticing the change – not accepting’. For example, ‘my parent said it was in the afternoon, but I know we met in the morning’. Instances where the participants expressed uncertainty, such as saying, ‘I’m not sure if they’re right’, were also coded as ‘not accepting’.

Inter-Rater Reliability

Memory data was coded according to the codes described in the prior section. To ensure reliability and accountability in the coding process, one individual coded all the data while a second person independently coded 50% of the dataset for inter-rater reliability.

Interrater reliability was assessed using Cohen’s kappa. Overall, the results demonstrated excellent agreement ($\kappa > 0.90$) for most categories, including central changes, peripheral changes, total changes, central omissions, incompatible alternatives, and noticing changes – not accepting ($p < .001$).

Strong agreement ($\kappa = 0.80 - 0.89$) was observed for hedge words at time 1 and time 2 ($p < .001$). The grain size category ($\kappa = 0.69, p = .003$) showed moderate to strong agreement. One category, noticing changes – accepting, had lower reliability ($\kappa = 0.656, p = .247$). However, this category only occurred twice across the jointly coded instances, and a single disagreement between raters substantially impacted the kappa value.

The coding system demonstrated high reliability across most categories supporting the reliability of coding decisions between raters. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus prior to analysis.

Deviations from Pre-Registration

While the core aspects of the study were pre-registered [<https://osf.io/fjs2p>], several analytic deviations occurred, reflecting the evolving nature of the coding scheme and practical

constraints that became apparent during data collection. Full details of these deviations are provided in the supplementary materials on OSF. Briefly, they include: (a) the development of a central/peripheral coding scheme not specified in the original plan; (b) the inclusion of pairwise analyses to assess memory change; (c) the omission of pre-registered coding of video-based tactics due to reliability concerns; (d) the post hoc application of Bonferroni corrections; and (e) the use of non-parametric tests when assumptions of normality were violated.

Analysis Plan

To address the research question regarding the effects of memory challenges from a close partner on recall, confidence, mood, and self-perception, data from the misinformation recipient were examined across multiple measures pre- and post-exposure to memory challenges. While recall, confidence, and memory trust (SSMQ) were collected from the misinformation provider, their results will not be analysed as it is not possible to disentangle the findings from their awareness of the study aims.

Recall and Confidence

Changes in memory recall were analysed by comparing pre-post accounts for target detail integration, omissions, and uncertainty markers (e.g., hedge words, alternative explanations). Confidence ratings were also assessed for shifts following partner discussion.

Perception of Memory

To assess changes in self-perception, pre-post scores on memory distrust (SSMQ) were analysed. The SSMQ–Partner was included to evaluate shifts in perceptions of partner memory reliability.

Wellbeing: Mood and Self-Esteem

Positive and negative affect (PANAS) were evaluated pre-post to assess the impact of memory challenges on participant mood. Further, pre-post scores on self-esteem (RSES) were analysed to assess the impact of memory challenges on self-esteem.

Individual-Level Differences

Trait-based measures, including locus of control (ICI), personality traits (IPIP-50), dissociation (DES-II), attachment style (ECR-S), and pre-discussion self-esteem (RSES) and memory distrust (SSMQ) were analysed for their influence on memory changes and omissions.

Relationship-Level Differences

Relationship dynamics, such as relationship type (friend or romantic partner), relationship length, self-reported closeness, and gender composition, were explored for their influence on memory changes and omissions.

Results

In cases where the data violated normality assumptions, a non-parametric alternative (i.e., the Wilcoxon signed-rank test) was conducted. In most cases, results from both parametric and non-parametric tests were consistent, so parametric tests were reported throughout. Only in one instance was the non-parametric test used instead.

Recall Changes and Omissions

This section reports the rates at which participants assigned to receive misinformation incorporated it into their written accounts. The analysis examines the total number of target misinformation details adopted (across peripheral and central details: maximum of two in each category) and the proportion integrated relative to the amount introduced, in order to account for instances where misinformation providers missed or conceded specific points. Frequency of the central, peripheral, and overall changes can be seen in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3

Number of Participants Incorporating Different Levels of Misinformation in Time 2 Written Accounts

	Number of target changes incorporated	Number of participants (n)	% of Total
Central Changes	0	62	72.9%
	1	18	21.2%
	2	5	5.9%
Peripheral Changes	0	41	48.2%
	1	37	43.5%
	2	7	8.2%
Total Changes	0	31	36.5%
	1	38	44.7%
	2	9	10.6%
	3	5	5.9%
	4	2	2.4%
Total Proportional Changes	0%	31	36.5%
	25%	23	27.1%
	33.3%	12	14.1%
	50%	9	10.6%
	66.7%	2	2.4%
	75%	5	5.9%
	100%	3	3.5%

Note. Total proportional changes refer to the number of changes incorporated by participants relative to number of changes introduced by their partner. 68% of partners introduced all four changes, 24.7% introduced three changes, 7% introduced two changes.

Further, the analysis examined the total number of target misinformation details omitted (across peripheral and central details: maximum of two in either category) and the proportion omitted relative to the amount introduced. That is, instances in which the original target detail was missing entirely from the second account despite being included in the first written account. Frequency of the central, peripheral, and overall omissions can be seen in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4

Number of Participants Omitting Different Levels of Targeted Details in Time 2 Written Accounts

	Number of target changes omitted	Number of participants (n)	% of Total
Central Omissions	0	71	83.5%
	1	12	14.1%
	2	2	2.4%
Peripheral Omissions	0	52	61.2%
	1	28	32.9%
	2	5	5.9%
Total Omissions	0	45	52.9%
	1	27	31.8%
	2	12	14.1%
	3	1	1.2%
	4	0	0%
Total Proportional Omissions	0%	45	52.9%
	25%	22	25.9%
	33.3%	2	2.4%
	50%	13	15.3%
	66.7%	2	2.4%
	75%	1	1.2%
	100%	0	0%

Note. Total proportional omissions refer to the number of omissions incorporated by participants relative to number of changes introduced by their partner. 68% of partners introduced all four changes, 24.7% introduced three changes, 7% introduced two changes.

Participants took on a mean of 15% (0.3) central changes, 30% (0.6) peripheral changes, 23% (0.9) total changes, and 26.3% of changes proportionate to the number of changes introduced by the partner. Participants omitted a mean of 10% (0.2) central details, 25% (0.5) peripheral details, 15% (0.6) total details, and 17.4% of details proportionate to the number of changes introduced by the partner.

Four one-sample t-tests were conducted to assess whether the rates of central and peripheral changes and omissions incorporated into the Time 2 written accounts significantly deviated from the null hypothesis of zero, which assumes that none of the target details would differ from the original Time 1 details. Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust the significance threshold for the four comparisons (adjusted p -value: .0125).

The results indicated that central changes significantly differed from the null hypothesis of zero, with a moderate effect size ($t(84) = 5.19, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.563$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.32, 0.79]). Similarly, peripheral changes significantly deviated from zero, with a large effect size ($t(84) = 8.64, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.938$, 95% CI [0.68, 1.19]).

Central detail omissions also significantly differed from zero. A significant number of target central details were omitted entirely in the Time 2 written accounts, with a small to moderate effect size ($t = 3.86, df = 84, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.419$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.64]). Peripheral omissions also significantly deviated from the omission rate of zero, with a moderate to large effect size ($t = 6.78, df = 84, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.736$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.97]).

Indicators of Uncertainty

Written accounts were reviewed for the presence of phrasing or word choices that indicated increased uncertainty at Time 2. The measures outlined below (Table 5.5) focus on phrases specifically related to the target changes, where participants did not omit or alter the items but instead expressed forms of uncertainty about them.

Five Bonferroni corrected, one-sample t-tests were conducted to assess whether the inclusion of uncertainty phrases around the target item in Time 2 written accounts significantly deviated from zero (adjusted p -value: .01).

The results revealed that, on average, participants significantly increased grain size when referring to the target items, with a small to moderate effect size ($t(84) = 2.95, p = .002$,

Cohen's $d = 0.32$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.54]). Additionally, on average, participants significantly reported noticing but disagreeing with the introduced changes, demonstrating a moderate effect size ($t(84) = 4.41$, $df = 84$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.479$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.70]). Comparisons for incompatible alternatives, explicit mentions of not remembering, and noticing changes and agreeing did not reach significance under the Bonferroni-corrected threshold (all $p > .01$).

Table 5.5

Number of Participants Who Used Different Types of Uncertainty Indicators in Time 2 Written Accounts

Uncertainty Measure	Number of participants (n)	% of Total
Grain size increase	8	9.4%
Incompatible Alternatives	3	3.5%
Explicit mention of not remembering	4	4.7%
Notices changes and incorporates	3	3.5%
Notices changes and doesn't incorporate	16	18.8%

The proportion of hedge words relative to total word count was compared between Time 1 ($M = 0.95\%$) and Time 2 ($M = 0.61\%$). Results indicated that participants used significantly more hedge words at Time 1 than at Time 2, $t(84) = 4.09$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.66]. However, the overall proportion of hedge words was very low (i.e., less than 1% of word count) at both time points, so any difference should be interpreted with caution.

Confidence

Confidence in the accuracy of the written memory account was assessed during the first session and after the misinformation exercise. To create an overall confidence score,

confidence ratings for the two target events were summed (resulting in a total confidence score out of 20 at each time point). A paired-samples t-test revealed that confidence in the accuracy of the two target events significantly decreased from Time 1 ($M = 16.7, SD = 2.54$) to Time 2 ($M = 15.9, SD = 2.74$), with a small effect size ($t = 2.67, df = 84, p = .005$, Cohen's $d = 0.289$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.51]). A paired-samples t-test revealed that confidence in the accuracy of the non-targeted events did not significantly differ from Time 1 ($M = 15.87, SD = 2.69$) to Time 2 ($M = 16.00, SD = 2.95$), $t(84) = 0.63, p = 0.53$.

Further, the change scores for confidence in the targeted events ($M = -0.82, SD = 2.85$) were significantly larger than those for non-targeted events ($M = 0.15, SD = 2.23$), $t(84) = 3.37, p = 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.366$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.59].

Perceptions of Memory

Misinformation recipients' ratings of how much they trust their own memory and their partners memories were compared pre-post discussion. For self-trust (SSMQ), there was a significant increase in self-trust observed from Time 1 ($M = 10.7, SD = 19.6$) to Time 2 ($M = 15.6, SD = 21.9$), as indicated by a paired-samples t-test ($t(84) = 3.33, p = 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.362$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.58]) and confirmed by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test ($W = 949, p = 0.001$, rank biserial correlation = 0.415). This indicated a small to moderate increase in participants' trust in their own memory following the discussion.

For trust in their partners memory (SSMQ – Partner), a paired-samples t-test showed a significant decrease in trust in their partner's memory from Time 1 ($M = 25.6, SD = 19.6$) to Time 2 ($M = 22.7, SD = 22.5$), with a small effect size ($t(84) = 2.04, p = 0.044$, Cohen's $d = 0.221$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.44]). However, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test did not confirm this finding ($W = 1925, p = 0.092$, rank biserial correlation = 0.218). This result suggests that while the misinformation recipients did show increased trust in their own memory, trust in their partners memory only showed a marginal trend toward decreasing.

Wellbeing: Mood and Self-Esteem

Three paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to assess whether misinformation recipient ratings on three wellbeing scales in Time 2 deviated significantly from Time 1. Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust the significance threshold for the three comparisons (adjusted *p*-value: .017).

Results indicate that the positive affect scale scores (PANAS) did not differ significantly between Time 1 ($M = 28.6, SD = 6.12$) and Time 2 ($M = 27.8, SD = 7.42$) (i.e., $p > .017$). However, negative affect scale scores decreased significantly between Time 1 ($M = 15.8, SD = 5.40$) and Time 2 ($M = 13.3, SD = 4.02$), with a medium effect size ($t = 5.59, df = 84, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = 0.606, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.37, 0.84]$). Further, self-esteem scores as measured by the RSES increased significantly between Time 1 ($M = 27.1, SD = 5.47$) and Time 2 ($M = 28.5, SD = 5.42$), with a small to moderate effect size ($t = 3.71, df = 84, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = .402, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.62]$).

Relationship Between Wellbeing Changes and Memory Changes

Although not originally planned, an exploratory analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between the magnitude of change in wellbeing measures and the level of misinformation incorporated or omitted. Change scores in positive affect, negative affect, and self-esteem were calculated and included in a correlation matrix along with total changes and total omissions in the written accounts. Given the exploratory nature of this analysis and the multiple comparisons conducted, a Bonferroni correction was applied, with a corrected significance threshold for 6 tests set at $p < .0083$.

The analysis revealed no significant correlations between any of the wellbeing scores and total omissions both prior to and after applying the correction. However, positive affect change scores remained significantly positively correlated with total changes incorporated,

$r(83) = .392, p < .001$. Additionally, self-esteem change scores were significantly positively correlated with total changes incorporated, $r(83) = .343, p < .001$.

A follow up multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether changes in positive affect and self-esteem predicted total memory changes. The overall model was significant, explaining approximately 23.8% of the variance in total memory changes ($R^2 = 0.238, F(2,82) = 12.8, p < .001$). Both predictors significantly contributed to the model. Positive affect change scores positively predicted total memory changes ($\beta = 0.351, SE = 0.019, t = 3.60, p < .001$), indicating that higher increases in positive affect were associated with greater memory changes. Similarly, self-esteem change scores were also a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.293, SE = 0.028, t = 3.01, p = .003$), suggesting that increases in self-esteem were associated with greater memory changes.

Individual-Level Predictors

To assess whether individual-based variables (e.g., individual difference measures, gender, age) predicted the incorporation of misinformation into Time 2 written accounts, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The overall model did not significantly predict incorporation of misinformation, ($F(17,67) = 0.796, p = 0.692$), explaining only 16.8% of the variance in the incorporation of misinformation ($R^2 = 0.168$). None of the individual differences variables significantly predicted the incorporation of misinformation. Specifically, there was no significant effect of gender, age, or any of the other relationship or individual difference measures, including depression anxiety and stress scores (DASS-21), Big-5 traits (IPIP-50), dissociation (DES-II), attachment (ECRS), locus of control (DICI), self-esteem (RSES), or memory distrust (SSMQ) (all p -values $> .05$).

To assess whether individual-based variables predicted the omission of target details from the Time 2 written accounts, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Again, the overall model did not significantly predict omissions ($F(17,67) = 0.926, p = 0.548$), accounting

for 19.0% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.190$). As with the incorporation of misinformation, none of the individual-based variables significantly predicted the omission of target details (all p -values $> .05$). However, a post hoc power analysis indicated that the two regressions for these predictors were underpowered, with achieved power below the recommended threshold of 0.80. Therefore, the results of the individual-level variables analysis should be interpreted with caution.

Relationship-Level Predictors

To assess whether relationship variables (e.g., length, proximity, composition) predicted the incorporation of misinformation into Time 2 written accounts, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The overall model did not demonstrate a significant fit ($F(4,80) = 1.19, p = 0.321$), with the model explaining only 5.62% of the variance in the incorporation of misinformation ($R^2 = 0.0562$). None of the relationship variables significantly predicted the incorporation of misinformation. Specifically, there was no significant effect of relationship type, how long the participants have known each other, how well participants rated their familiarity with one another, or the gender composition of the pair (all p values $> .05$).

A multiple regression analysis was also conducted to examine whether relationship variables predicted the omission of misinformation in Time 2 written accounts. The overall model also did not provide a significant fit, ($F(4,80) = 1.41, p = 0.240$), explaining only 6.57% of the variance in omissions ($R^2 = 0.0657$). None of the relationship variables significantly predicted the omission of misinformation. Specifically, there was no significant effect of relationship type, how long the participants have known each other, how well participants rated their familiarity with one another, or the gender composition of the pair (all p values $> .05$).

Discussion

This study was designed to provide new insights into the impacts of memory challenges within intimate relationships, examining how gaslighting tactics may disrupt memory recall,

confidence, and self-perception. Through adapting memory conformity paradigms to reflect autobiographical memory challenges between close partners, this research examined the way in which social pressure influences the acceptance of misinformation, as well as its relationship with self-trust.

Impacts of Partner-Led Memory Challenges on Recall and Confidence

The hypothesis that, when challenged by their partners, participants would change their recall and lose confidence was generally upheld. Participants incorporated an average of 26.3% of the changes introduced by their partners, with about 15% of central details and 30% of peripheral details and omitted an average of 17.4% of the target details that were challenged by their partner. Two indicators of uncertainty also increased in the written accounts, suggesting a change in confidence as a result of the manipulation. This involved increasing grain size, utilising less specific description of target details to avoid inaccuracy (e.g., revising “met at 9am” to “met in the morning” after being challenged about the specific time of meeting). This also involved explicitly acknowledging their partner’s challenge and expressed uncertainty about the detail, without adopting the misinformation. Finally, participants' confidence in the accuracy of their recollections decreased slightly for targeted events between sessions, while no change was observed for non-targeted events. Other uncertainty indicators, such as presenting incompatible alternatives or explicitly stating that they don’t remember the detail, were observed but did not occur frequently enough to reach significance. Hedge words were also measured but were used very infrequently overall and, contrary to expectations, showed a small proportional decrease on the second occasion.

The adoption of misinformation seen in this study was greater than the 16% reported by Harris et al., (2017) using confederates to challenge autobiographical memories and higher than similar non-autobiographical memory studies (e.g., Roediger et al., 2001) suggesting that pressure from close relationships can significantly elevate misinformation acceptance for

autobiographical memories. It is possible that the elevated acceptance of misinformation in this study could also reflect repetition as participants debated the details with their partners over a prolonged discussion and repetition is an important contributor to the acceptance of misinformation (Azad et al., 2022). As the discussions were led by the participants, the amount of repetition was not controlled. While traditional memory conformity paradigms often involve single-instance exposure to misinformation, as this is ecologically valid to co-witness scenarios, repetition over time is a central component of gaslighting in the context of IPV (Darke et al., 2025b) and its deliberate manipulation in future studies would be important to examine. In another divergence from traditional memory conformity studies, the current paradigm elicited resistance and debate between partners. Notably, despite this direct conflict, participants still incorporated significant misinformation into their independent written recollections. This finding has important implications for understanding gaslighting tactics that are more direct and combative, such as those commonly observed in IPV (Darke et al., 2025a).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the valence of events discussed was neither controlled for nor directly measured, as it was not an aim of this study. Given the variability of events experienced and shared between partners, controlling for the valence of all four memories selected across couples would be challenging. Observationally, participants predominantly selected neutral or positive experiences for discussion. Prior research on memory conformity has suggested that negative or ambiguous events are associated with higher rates of misinformation acceptance compared to neutral or positive ones (e.g., van Damme & Smets, 2014; Peace & Constantin, 2015). While the events discussed in this study appeared largely neutral or positive, it is not possible to confirm participants' subjective interpretation of these recollections. Consequently, the potential influence of valence on misinformation acceptance cannot be determined within this study

A decrease in the participant's confidence in their recall was predicted based on documented effects of gaslighting in IPV (e.g., Hailes & Goodman, 2023). This does, however, contrast with previous findings on memory conformity between partners where there can be increased confidence in recalled accounts after discussing them, even for disputed details (French et al., 2008). A key difference in this study is that the partners were instructed to persistently refuse to compromise, potentially undermining the typical confidence boost associated with collaborative recollection. Even so, decreases in confidence were relatively small and only seen in some indices (confidence ratings, grain size, noticing and expressing uncertainty about changes). As only two out of four events were altered, the global effect of discussing shared events with a partner may have mitigated the negative impact of being challenged, resulting in only a small decrease. Another possibility, although not tested for in this study, is that participants retained relatively high confidence because this was their first experience of being challenged in this way, as opposed to the repeated wearing down characteristic of gaslighting in IPV. Future studies could benefit from incorporating probing questions to explore why confidence levels were selected or changed, offering further insight into the participants' decision.

Impact of Partner-Led Memory Challenges on Self-Perception and Wellbeing

Perception of Memory

As gaslighting tactics involve challenging an individual's ability to perceive and recall events independently, this study aimed to explore how memory challenges influence participants' perceptions of their own memory abilities and their evaluations of their partner's memory. It was predicted that trust in one's own memory would decrease after being challenged by a partner. The predicted effects of misinformation on participants' perceptions of their partner's memory ability were, however, considered exploratory, as no known prior research has examined this specific interpersonal dynamic. Unexpectedly, participants rated their ability

to recall accurately higher after engaging in the misinformation exercise with their partner. There are several factors that may explain this counterintuitive finding.

First, it is possible that the scale used to measure memory distrust in this study (i.e., SSMQ) may not have fully captured the range of memory distrust. The SSMQ primarily focuses on omission errors (i.e., how forgetful respondents perceive themselves to be), but does not address commission errors (i.e., susceptibility to misremembering things). Future research could benefit from exploring alternative measures of memory distrust that more comprehensively assess changes in self-perception, such as probing questions or the Memory Distrust Scale (Nash et al., 2022).

Second, this may reflect the general confidence boost seen when partners cooperatively discuss even disputed details (French et al., 2008). While confidence in the accuracy of the two target events slightly decreased, participants discussed four events in total, with two remaining unaltered. Consequently, this study may have been unable to isolate the effects of memory challenges from the confidence-boosting effects of reaching agreement on other elements of the recollections. Secondly, it is important to note that participants who received misinformation also reported a marginal decrease in trust in their partner's memory. This suggests that when participants encountered denial of elements they recalled clearly, they may have interpreted this as evidence of their superior memory relative to their partner. Together, these findings may suggest that the misinformation exercise had a nuanced impact on confidence in memory. Participants may have become slightly less confident in the specific event that was challenged, as evidenced in their confidence rating on the individual written accounts but gained confidence in their ability to evaluate their memories after collaboratively discussing with their partner.

While it may be relatively easy to undermine belief in the accuracy of small event details, especially challenged by a trusted co-witness (Condon et al., 2015), altering someone's

belief in their ability to recollect in general likely requires more sustained evidence over time to increase the plausibility that their memory abilities are fundamentally flawed. This interpretation aligns with reports from individuals who describe experiencing gaslighting, often fluctuating between angry resistance and hopelessness as their belief in their abilities are gradually worn down (Hailes, 2022). Further, memory research has clearly demonstrated that repetition can make information appear more credible (e.g., Hasher et al., 1997; Azad et al., 2023). Consistent with this, a prior study on memory conformity found that single instances of telling people they had poor memories did not affect rates of memory conformity (Monds et al., 2019). Therefore, it may require repeated exposure to suggestions of poor recollection for self-image to shift to accommodate the belief that one's memory ability is truly that bad. Future studies may be able to explore this process through using experimental paradigms that introduce repeated challenges over multiple sessions. However, it would be essential to carefully evaluate the ethical implications of replicating repeated dynamics that are predicted to erode self-trust.

Wellbeing: Mood and Self-Esteem

While gaslighting in IPV typically involves repeated manipulation within the broader context of abuse, this study aimed to explore the more fundamental relationship between being challenged and pressured by a partner about recollections and its impact on wellbeing outcomes, such as mood and self-esteem. Given that partners in this study not only contradicted participants' recollections but also firmly asserted their own version of events without compromise, it was predicted that participants would experience a decrease in mood. However, the findings did not align with these predictions. Instead, it was found that there was a moderate decrease in negative affect after the misinformation exercise. That is, participants felt less negative after the exercise. Interestingly, however, positive affect did not change at all after the discussion.

While unexpected, there are a few explanations that could explain this outcome. First, participants rated their mood immediately upon arrival at the experiment and again at the end, just before leaving. It is possible that the reduction in negative affect reflects initial nervousness or anxiety upon arrival, which may have dissipated as the session progressed. This effect could have been reinforced by the time participants spent engaging in one-on-one conversations with their partner prior to the second mood rating. Further, given the study's structure, participants completed mood ratings only after discussing all four memories and quietly writing them down in a private booth. More frequent mood assessments throughout the discussion process might have revealed more nuanced changes in affect. Additionally, it may not be surprising that mood did not show a dramatic decline, as unlike typical gaslighting interactions, this study involved no arguments, insults, or overtly abusive behaviours.

Another unexpected finding was that participants' self-esteem ratings increased after the misinformation exercise, with a small to moderate effect. While this was not predicted, the increase in self-esteem, when considered alongside the rise in participants' trust in their own memory ability, may reflect a similar underlying effect. Self-esteem represents a deeper, more enduring belief in one's value and abilities. While gaslighting in IPV typically targets self-esteem, individual instances of memory challenges may not fully capture the mechanisms by which self-belief is undermined over time in a relationship. Instead, participants may have felt more confident in their ability to recall events accurately and potentially experienced a boost in self-esteem from the positive interaction of collaboratively recalling memories with a close partner.

Relationship Between Changes in Wellbeing and Recall

Given the observed variation in wellbeing scores among participants, as well as differences in recall changes and omissions, an exploratory analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between these factors. Interestingly, mood and self-esteem changes

were not linked to the amount of information individuals omitted from their written accounts. However, positive affect and self-esteem scores seemed to increase with the number of changes participants incorporated into their recollection, together explaining 23% of the variance in the number of changes incorporated by participants.

From a memory conformity perspective, this finding is not particularly surprising, as individuals have been found to be more likely to adopt misinformation from people they like and feel connect to (Condon et al., 2015; French et al., 2008). Therefore, if participants felt positively about the interaction with their partner, and it positively impacted their reflection on the relationship, they may have been more likely to accept the misinformation. Although this may seem less relevant to the more overtly argumentative or dismissive forms of gaslighting that are often depicted in cases of IPV, the literature has described a range of gaslighting tactics, some of which involve feigning concern for the individual, such as presenting manipulation as ‘taking care of you’ or acting out of concern for your wellbeing (e.g., Sweet, 2019; Stern, 2007). In this context, the act of correcting someone could involve complex interactions with positive affect and self-esteem. However, this finding explains only a small portion of the variance in misinformation acceptance. Clearly, other factors also influence why individuals incorporate challenges posed by their partner.

Impact of Individual and Relationship Differences on Recall

Individual-Level Differences

Recent research on gaslighting has begun to explore the role of individual differences in its dynamics and outcomes (e.g., March et al., 2023; Miano et al., 2021). However, there is limited evidence that individual traits significantly influence the impact of this specific form of psychological manipulation. It also remains unclear which aspect of gaslighting might be linked to individual differences, as the above studies primarily examined correlations between personality traits and lived experiences of gaslighting, rather than focusing on specific

mechanisms or dynamics. Given that gaslighting occurs within a complex social dynamic and across diverse contexts, it may be difficult to determine the cause or relevance of any observed correlations.

While prior research has investigated the relationship between memory, suggestibility, and individual differences in eyewitness contexts, findings have been largely inconsistent (Raymond, 2022). Further, these studies have not addressed how misinformation is negotiated within close relationships. The current study included measures of individual traits previously suggested to influence susceptibility to post-event misinformation (i.e., Big 5 personality traits, dissociation, anxiety, locus of control, attachment style). The findings revealed no relationship between these traits and participants' tendency to adopt or omit target details. Given the mixed results in suggestibility and memory conformity research, even under highly controlled conditions, it is unsurprising that relationships did not emerge when examining the impact of individual differences on autobiographical memories between close partners. These findings could suggest that individual differences do not impact on the extent to which individuals evaluate their recollections when challenged by a close partner, however, given that these results were underpowered this should be interpreted with caution as this may have limited the ability to detect smaller effects.

Although the dynamics explored in this study represent only one aspect of gaslighting, challenging recollections and perceptions is a central feature. It is, therefore, notable that no significant relationship was found between individual traits and the likelihood of changing one's recollection. While it remains unclear whether these traits might play a larger role in the context of prolonged, repeated challenges throughout a relationship, the findings imply that at least early-stage responses to manipulation may be shaped more by social dynamics than individual differences.

Relationship-Level Differences

Prior research on memory conformity research in intimate relationships has shown that both friends and couples are more likely to adopt misinformation from one another than from strangers (French et al., 2008; Hope et al., 2008) with familiarity argued to be the key factor driving this (Condon et al., 2015). However, in this study higher familiarity, longer relationship durations, and romantic relationships did not predict changes or omissions in participants' recall. Nor was gender composition related to rates of misinformation acceptance and omission.

Several potential explanations may account for this result. First, despite some variability, participants generally reported high levels of familiarity with their partners. Although including strangers or confederates as a control condition would make it easier to isolate these effects, it would be difficult to replicate the current study with strangers, given its focus on shared autobiographical recall. Further, there were fewer romantic couples than friends in this sample, which may have also resulted in insufficient power to detect difference between relationship type. As it stands, it appears that degrees of intimacy may be less impactful on misinformation acceptance compared to the general social pressure exerted through the memory challenges.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The Impacts of Partner-Led Challenges on Recollection

The findings from this study have several implications and suggest directions for future research into the impact of memory challenges from close partners. Firstly, the results indicate that pressure from close partners can amplify memory distortion for autobiographical memories relative to studies using confederates (Harris et al., 2017). These findings underscore the potential for abusive partners to strategically manipulate recollection and confidence, influencing how individuals report or evaluate the accuracy of their accounts. Given the importance of credibility assessments for IPV victim-survivors in legal settings (Epstein &

Goodman, 2019), understanding how psychological abuse tactics undermine confidence and consistency in recollection is critical. Exploring the impact of gaslighting on victim-survivors' perceptions is an important initial step toward developing more effective support strategies and legal responses.

While this study employed a novel paradigm to investigate gaslighting, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and outline areas for further research to refine the paradigm and extend its capacity to provide practical recommendations. A primary limitation was the inherent inability to fully replicate the complex dynamics of gaslighting abuse within a laboratory setting, nor would it be ethical to attempt to do so. Consequently, this study could not capture the long-term, repeated, and emotionally abusive dynamics that are characteristic of real world gaslighting (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). For experiments that do attempt to examine the memory conformity aspect of gaslighting, however, there are some aspects that pose challenges in lab settings.

Firstly, the use of autobiographical memories in research is notoriously difficult. The plausibility of changed details likely varied across participants, influencing misinformation acceptance (e.g., Roediger et al., 2001; Hinze et al., 2013) and making it more challenging to isolate the effects of specific manipulations. Incorporating probing questions about participants' reasoning for including or excluding details may help clarify whether the salience of certain details influences misinformation acceptance. Additionally, the age of participants' recollections also varied which may have influenced their susceptibility to misinformation. Future research could benefit from controlling for the recency of recalled events

Secondly, the addition of control groups where misinformation is introduced without pressure to accept it or with no misinformation exposure, could help disentangle the effects of interpersonal pressure from incidental misinformation acceptance, providing clearer insights into the role of social pressure in memory conformity. Thirdly, future studies would benefit

from incorporating measures of general uncertainty across both targeted and non-targeted memories, allowing for comparisons that could serve as a control for baseline variability. Given that individuals may vary their language and expression of certainty across events and time, it would be valuable to implement coding schemes that capture broader shifts in uncertainty (e.g., changes in grain size, both decreases and increases) beyond the specific, pre-selected target details.

The Potential Role of Repetition

Further, as discussed above, gaslighting is inherently a repeated behaviour (Darke et al., 2025b) and repeatedly denying individuals' version of events increases the likelihood of them changing their recollection (Azad et al., 2022). Systematically exploring the cumulative impact of repeated memory challenges on recollection, self-trust, and self-perception represents an important direction for future research although, once again, there are ethical and practical challenges involved in repeatedly manipulating autobiographical memories and close-partner relationships. Potential alternatives may include incorporating repetition within a single session or day, with participants discussing the same events multiple times between tasks. Prior research has shown that even limited repetition can increase misinformation acceptance (e.g., Hassan & Barber, 2021). Repetition could also enable future studies to examine the effectiveness or resistance strategies in mitigating the harmful effects of repeated manipulation attempts. For instance, French and colleagues (2008) found that actively disputing the misinformation made participants less likely to be misled by their partners. Investigating the relative impact of different resistance strategies could have important implications for practical and therapeutic interventions aimed at countering repeated memory challenges.

The Important Role of Interpersonal Dynamics

Another key finding of this study was the lack of relationship between individual differences and misinformation acceptance. The results suggest that, at least in early stages of

memory manipulation, the social dynamics of being pressured by a close partner played more significant role in altering recall than any measured individual difference. This aligns with interviews conducted with victim-survivors of gaslighting (e.g., Hailes & Goodman, 2023), which overwhelmingly emphasise the influence of social and environmental factors in reinforcing gaslighting, rather than any pre-existing personal disposition. This finding supports the argument that gaslighting operates by exploiting social and relational dynamics to enforce compliance (e.g., Spear, 2023; Abramson, 2014). Consequently, practical interventions may benefit from identifying how intimate partners create situational pressures that encourage self-doubt and compliance, rather than emphasising individual vulnerabilities. This may involve developing strategies to detect manipulative patterns of communication early in relationships.

Future research may also benefit from further investigating into the role of normative pressure and social dynamics within this paradigm. One limitation of using close partners, rather than confederates, is the potential variability in how direct or intense the pressure applied by partners may be. However, this variability could also be leveraged to examine how different conversational strategies or tactics influence misinformation acceptance. It may be that variations in the way participants deliver challenges have significant effects on misinformation acceptance, confidence, or interactions with other predictors, such as self-esteem. Further research into broader social or relational dynamics affecting misinformation acceptance, confidence, and self-perception would be valuable. For example, Graves and Samp (2021) found evidence that power imbalances within relationships predicted rates of gaslighting. Investigating the role of interpersonal dynamics such as forms of power imbalance could provide deeper insight into how social influences shape collaborative memory process and gaslighting.

Self-Perception and Wellbeing

The study produced some unexpected findings regarding the relationship between memory, confidence, mood, and self-esteem. While misinformation acceptance increased and recall confidence slightly decreased, self-esteem and mood showed positive trends. Although this is a novel paradigm that requires further investigation to disentangle the effects of different factors, these findings offer some interesting implications. They suggest a complex process through which individuals process and internalise social challenges to their recollections. The simultaneous loss of confidence in the specific event details, paired with the increased self-esteem and trust in one's broader memory abilities, may reflect temporary boosts associated with the bonding and collaborative aspects of recalling events with a partner.

However, these findings also underscore the potential for more insidious long-term effects, as repeated challenges could gradually erode an individuals' trust in their judgement and increase the personal plausibility that they are incapable of perceiving events accurately. It is important to note that the study did not index the emotional valence of the events discussed, which may have influenced how positively participants felt about recollecting with their partner. Future studies should examine factors underlying these trends, including the role of event valence and positive bonding experiences. Investigating whether these initial dynamics predict more severe effects following repeated challenges would also be a valuable avenue for future research.

Conclusion

This study represents a significant step forward in understanding the psychological impacts of gaslighting within intimate partner relationships, particularly its effects on memory, confidence, and self-perception. By examining how memory challenges from close partners influence recall and confidence, this research highlights the important role of interpersonal dynamics in shaping misinformation acceptance. The findings demonstrate that memory

manipulation within close relationships not only has immediate effects on recollection and confidence but also highlight the need to explore the cumulative effects of repeated memory challenges. Further, while not explicitly tested in this study, the findings raise concerns that initial positive interactions between partners may play a role in masking the early stages of manipulation.

Given that consistency and confidence in recollection are critical in forensic settings, particularly in cases involving IPV, it is essential to further investigate how persistent psychological manipulation affects both memory and self-perception. Future studies should focus on evaluating effective interventions and strategies to help individuals' identity and resist manipulation attempts. Additionally, examining the influence of relationship dynamics, such as power imbalances and communication patterns, will deepen understanding of how gaslighting functions in close relationships. Developing interventions that empower individuals to recognize manipulative patterns early, reinstate self-efficacy and trust, and evaluating forensic responses to survivors of psychological abuse will be essential. Ultimately, continued research into how memory and self-trust are impacted within these contexts will help inform prevention efforts and offer better support for those affected by gaslighting in IPV.

Chapter 6: General Discussion

Gaslighting is a term that has garnered significant public attention in recent years, however, research and practice addressing this specific form of psychological abuse remains remarkably underdeveloped. This thesis aimed to address this gap by employing a mixed-method approach to define, model, and empirically investigate gaslighting more thoroughly. The findings are intended to advance research on IPV, contribute to policy and legislative debates, and inform public awareness campaigns. Through this approach, these findings can make contributions to both academic discourse and practical interventions in the field of IPV. The thesis was structured around five chapters, each addressing one of four key aims that collectively target critical gaps in current understandings of gaslighting in IPV contexts.

Aim 1. *Explore how gaslighting has been conceptualised across disciplines and how the definition can be refined based on lived experience perspectives.*

Chapter 1 critically reviewed existing literature, and explored the assumptions and limitations in the way gaslighting has historically been conceptualised and studied. Chapter 2 presented a qualitative study that offered a functional definition of gaslighting, grounded in the experiences of victim-survivors and IPV professionals. Together, these chapters provide an important foundation for both research and practice, by seeking functional ways to operationalise gaslighting.

Aim 2. *Explore the factors that shape the experience of gaslighting within IPV, and how they inform a comprehensive model of gaslighting dynamics.*

Chapter 3 used a qualitative methodology to investigate the mechanisms and facilitators of gaslighting within IPV. This chapter offered a framework for understanding the complex dynamics that perpetuate gaslighting in IPV, including individual, relational, and ecological factors. Through unpacking these dynamics and factors, the chapter contributed to a more

comprehensive understanding of the abusive patterns inherent to gaslighting and highlighted critical areas for intervention.

Aim 3. *Explore how gaslighting is recognised and defined by the broader population.*

In Chapter 4, the thesis investigated public perceptions of gaslighting through an experimental approach. The findings highlighted gaps in the understanding and recognition of gaslighting in young adults, indicating a need for targeted educational campaigns.

Aim 4. *Explore the cognitive impacts of gaslighting and consider the potential consequences for individuals navigating forensic processes.*

Chapter 5 focused on the cognitive mechanisms underlying gaslighting through a novel experimental paradigm. It explored how challenges between close partners can affect memory, confidence, and self-perception in a laboratory setting, and considered the forensic implications of these effects.

Together, these chapters offer a comprehensive examination of gaslighting's conceptual foundations, dynamics, mechanisms, and consequences. The following discussion synthesises these findings into key thematic areas and considers the thesis' limitations and directions for future research.

The Evolution of Gaslighting

One of the central challenges in this thesis was navigating the fragmented and limited body of research on gaslighting, which spans multiple disciplines and perspectives. The term has undergone significant transformation in its meaning and application over time. The concept has evolved significantly since its original introduction in literature by Baron and Whitehead (1969), which focused on malicious and intentional manipulation aimed at hospitalising family members for material gain. Early investigations framed gaslighting around attempts to influence external targets, such as hospital staff, as opposed to the interpersonal conceptions of gaslighting discussed in popular culture today. However, in the 1980's researchers began to

shift focus from overt schemes to broader relational dynamics, exploring how gaslighting could emerge in everyday relationships to exert control or maintain power (e.g., Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Dorpat, 1996).

As psychology research continued to focus on the interpersonal processes involved in gaslighting, researchers began to explore what may cause individuals to ‘internalise’ the gaslighting attempts. This led to literature investigating traits or behaviours that increase people’s vulnerability to gaslighting (e.g., Miano et al., 2021; March et al., 2023). Outside of psychology, however, there was increasing literature emphasising the broader sociocultural factors that enable and reinforce gaslighting attempts (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Spear, 2020). Some authors criticised the over-individualised nature of psychological research on gaslighting, as it failed to account for important and influential aspects, such as the social and structural powers that enable one person to define another’s reality (e.g. Sweet, 2019).

In fact, the few studies that have examined gaslighting from the perspective of victim-survivors of IPV, including Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis, emphasise the significance of interpersonal, sociocultural, and structural factors (e.g., power imbalances, gender roles, institutional reinforcement), rather than attributing it primarily to personal sources of vulnerability (e.g., Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022). This suggests that a deeper understanding of the coercive and controlling dynamics of gaslighting within relationships, along with the ecological factors that enable or reinforce it, may hold greater clinical and practical relevance to the individuals most affected.

The Challenges and Significance of Defining Gaslighting

To appropriately address gaslighting in both research and practice, it must be defined consistently and intentionally. How gaslighting is defined not only shapes how it is understood but also carries significant implications for its recognition, measurement, and legal application.

This thesis examined the implications of a proposed gaslighting definition in research, policy, practice, and public awareness.

Research

Although elements of gaslighting have been woven into IPV theory and literature for years (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 1993; Sackett & Saunders, 1999) it has only more recently been studied as a distinct form of abuse within the context of IPV. However, researching gaslighting presents unique challenges, as it often co-occurs with other forms of abuse. Its complex, overlapping nature with other coercive and psychologically abusive behaviours makes it difficult to establish clear boundaries (Hailes, 2022). Further, although specific definitions have been provided in prior studies (e.g., Spear, 2020; Bhatti et al., 2021; Hailes & Goodman, 2023), these often differ with respect to core characteristics. These inconsistencies highlight the lack of consensus, and the absence of critical discussion, about what should be included in a definition of gaslighting.

Chapter 2 of this thesis proposed a functional definition of gaslighting that is situated in IPV, derived from the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors and IPV service providers. One benefit of proposing this definition is that it can foster meaningful dialogue within the research community regarding what constitutes gaslighting and how it can be distinguished from other forms of abuse. Further, it establishes a foundation for more consistent and rigorous future investigations into gaslighting, supporting subsequent research into its facilitating factors, impacts, and potential interventions.

A brief summation of the definition is as follows: Gaslighting is a pattern of manipulative behaviours that target a victim's capacity to perceive and evaluate reality independently. It can manifest through speech, actions, facial expressions, or manipulation of the environment and social networks. Tactics include lying, denying, shifting blame, accusing the victim of mental 'deficiency', and changing the narrative depending on the audience and

context. The probabilistic effects on victims vary, ranging from confusion to a complete loss of identity. Further, it can impact different domains, such as recollection, perception, emotions, and reactions. Gaslighting is almost always a repeated behaviour, meant to induce perceptual changes over time. Subsidiary behaviours include isolating the victim from external perspectives and involving other people in the deception. It frequently co-occurs with other forms of abuse, either to conceal said abuse or reinforce the gaslighting. Finally, gaslighting often occurs against the background of intimacy and power inequality and can further develop power imbalance.

The proposed definition emphasised the need for flexibility in including certain elements. For instance, in cases where both behaviour and outcome are severe, the focus of repetition and intent may be less important. However, in less severe cases, repetition and malicious intent become more salient as a means to recognise that gaslighting is occurring. To ensure a gaslighting definition both accurately captures the range of experiences in IPV and creates a meaningful foundation for future research, it must be adaptable and considerate of these different components.

This thesis conceptualises gaslighting as a distinct subtype of psychological abuse that is often embedded within, yet not reducible to, coercive control. It operates through a specific mechanism of reality distortion and erosion of self-trust, and its effects can contribute to the entrapment described in coercive control scholarship (e.g., Stark, 2007; Douglas et al., 2021). While gaslighting frequently functions as a tactic within controlling relationships, it can also occur outside them and does not require a coercive control framework to be recognised as abusive. Clarifying this distinction matters because gaslighting's unique psychological mechanism has implications for identification, measurement, intervention, and credibility assessments in legal and service contexts. At the same time, this thesis recognises areas of

conceptual overlap and scholarly disagreement and therefore advances this distinction as a working theory rather than a fixed taxonomy.

Policy and Law

Beyond the conceptual ambiguity present in research, the failure to clearly define gaslighting creates substantial barriers to its practical application within policy and legal contexts. With the increased focus worldwide on developing and refining laws that address coercive and psychologically abusive behaviours (e.g., EIGE, 2021), gaslighting is increasingly referenced or implied within these discussions. However, the lack of consensus around its definition introduces critical challenges. For example, differing views on whether gaslighting must be intentional, a repeated pattern of behaviour, or dependent upon specific outcomes, all influence who is included within its scope and, consequently, how it may be understood or responded to across different systems.

The proposed definition of gaslighting in Chapter 2 has implications for how the concept may inform policy and legal frameworks, particularly in relation to recent coercive control reforms internationally. For instance, the issue of intent is often a decisive factor in some legal contexts, while others such as protective orders, place greater emphasis on patterns of behaviour and future risk. Given the inherently deceptive nature of gaslighting, assessing the perpetrator's awareness or intent can be difficult. As it currently stands, the coercive control laws in NSW, Australia, may not fully capture the range of gaslighting presentations described by the Australian respondents in this thesis. Additionally, as discussed, the relative importance of the central definitional components (i.e., intent, repetition, behaviour, outcome) will likely vary by case and by legal context. As more jurisdictions consider how behaviours such as gaslighting intersect with existing policy or legal mechanisms, it is essential to address the issues raised in Chapter 2 regarding who would be included and excluded under different operational definitions.

Public Awareness

The growing popular discourse around gaslighting represents a positive step forward for raising awareness about covert forms of IPV. However, the ‘definitional creep’ of the term may lead to unintended negative consequences. Gaslighting is often applied quite liberally in popular discourse to scenarios ranging from simple disagreements to severe psychological abuse (DiGiulio, 2018; Kippert, 2021). In fact, gaslighting was recently identified as one of the most misused psychological terms in a publication by the American Psychological Society (Medaris, 2024). Improving public understanding of gaslighting is essential, as it can enhance the recognition of abuse by both victim-survivors and bystanders, improve screening and identification of warning signs in health settings, and can help dispel harmful myths and misunderstandings that may hinder help-seeking behaviours or lead to misconceptions in legal settings, such as among jurors (Webster et al., 2018; Ellison, 2019).

Chapter 4 investigated the understanding and recognition of gaslighting within a student sample. While the findings showed a promising level of awareness and condemnation of gaslighting, there were significant ambiguities in how the term was defined and recognised in context. Specifically, participants appeared to have a generalised and vague understanding of gaslighting, which led to its misuse and overapplication. These gaps emphasise the need for educational campaigns that not only raise awareness about the seriousness of gaslighting but also clarify its boundaries, patterns, and underlying factors. Campaigns in schools and communities could foster a better understanding of more subtle forms of abuse and encourage more effective recognition and responses to genuine instances of gaslighting. Given the disproportionate representation of young adults in IPV (AIHW, 2024), understanding their use of the term is important. However, it is equally crucial for future research to explore how the term is recognised and understood across broader populations, especially those who may be less familiar with the concept.

Modelling the Dynamics of Gaslighting

Modelling the dynamics of gaslighting in IPV is crucial for improving both the recognition and response to this covert form of abuse. Research into the mechanisms and processes involved in gaslighting is limited particularly in comparison to other forms of IPV. Understanding how gaslighting operates within relationships, including its psychological impact on victim-survivors, can significantly influence the development of more effective interventions and supports. For example, better models of gaslighting can inform trauma-informed approaches within the justice system, ensuring that victim-survivors are supported throughout reporting and legal proceedings, and reduce the likelihood of them being discredited in court (Sweet, 2019; Epstein & Goodman, 2019).

Recent studies on gaslighting, such as those by Sweet (2019), Hailes (2022), and Klein et al. (2023), have begun to explore the relational and social dynamics of gaslighting in IPV. However, each study has notable limitations. These studies often focus on specific aspects of the gaslighting process (e.g., individual, relational, or ecological), or draw from a narrow range of participants and experiences. To address these gaps, comprehensive models are needed to encompass a broader spectrum of experiences and capture the complex interplay between different aspects of the gaslighting process. Chapter 3 of this thesis employed an open-ended survey to gather insights from victim-survivors of gaslighting and support service providers, offering a more nuanced understanding of gaslighting in IPV. The chapter proposed a conceptual model that integrates individual, relational, and environmental dynamics, as well as the outcomes associated with prolonged gaslighting. The key findings from this study are as follows:

First, the model identified patterns of gaslighting behaviour, along with their broader functions and outcomes. The behaviours included specific tactics designed to distort reality (e.g., denial, fabrication, specific roles or narratives), a combination of gradual and sporadic

gaslighting attempts, and efforts to isolate, or involve, victim-survivor's support networks. Recognising these patterns is vital for shaping policy and legislation, as it facilitates the creation of clear, standardised criteria for identifying and addressing gaslighting in cases of IPV.

Second, the study found that access to support and resources was crucial in countering gaslighting. Informal networks were particularly effective in countering gaslighting narratives and validating victim-survivor experiences. However, while formal support services (e.g., police, social workers), can offer assistance that informal networks cannot, some victim-survivors reported that interactions with these services can reinforce the abuse. Consequently, the effectiveness of formal support depends on the awareness and training these services have surrounding psychological abuse.

Third, the study emphasised the importance of understanding how relationship dynamics and context influence the use of gaslighting, as this knowledge is critical for the development of appropriate support strategies. The findings indicated that perpetrators often exploited power disparities (e.g., financial or parental dependencies, social standing) or manufactured reliance, such as using isolation to silence victim-survivors or enforce compliance. Additionally, the trust and intimacy inherent in the relationship were manipulated to coerce agreement or conceal intentions.

A fourth finding of this study was that cultural attitudes play a significant role in the processes and acceptance of gaslighting, as it heavily relies on pre-existing social norms and frameworks that shape the perceived acceptability of certain behaviours within relationships. Certain gendered attitudes contributed to community reinforcement of gaslighting, such as the acceptance of men controlling their partners or the expectation that women should compromise or take responsibility for fixing relationships. Additionally, communities reinforced this

dynamic through being less equipped to recognise non-physical abuse, often dismissing concerns or failing to intervene when witnessing such behaviour.

Finally, the study found that gaslighting has a range of immediate and long-term effects, which are often mutually reinforcing. Due to the diversity of experiences among victim-survivors, gaslighting resulted in impacts across multiple domains, including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, physical, and practical areas (e.g., financial, legal, and medical costs). Additionally, recovery from gaslighting is highly individualised and varies based on the nature and duration of the abuse. It is often a non-linear process that requires rebuilding self-trust and agency. While strategies such as social reintegration, validation, and empowerment may support recovery, they are unlikely to fully counter the damage, especially when cultural and systemic factors play a significant role in reinforcing the abuse.

The findings of this study demonstrated the interplay of multiple factors that contribute to gaslighting in IPV. It emphasised how gaslighting is a complex social phenomenon that reinforces power disparities through covert tactics, making it difficult for victim-survivors to validate their experiences. By doing so, the model provides a comprehensive foundation for future studies. The findings also have several practical applications. First, the model offers a comprehensive understanding of gaslighting which can assist service providers, law enforcement, and Family Courts to better identify victims and recognise the often-overlooked impacts of this abuse. Second, it advocates for targeted awareness campaigns aimed at increasing community understanding of gaslighting, strengthening prevention strategies and improving support for victim-survivors.

Forensic Implications of Gaslighting Victimisation

Legal systems globally are ill-equipped to address complex interpersonal crimes such as IPV (Reeves et al., 2023; Gribaldo, 2014; Goodmark, 2008). This inadequacy becomes particularly evident in court settings, where victim-survivors face significant challenges when

testifying. In a review of IPV victim-survivor experiences in court, Epstein and Goodman (2019) documented persistent issues impacting the perceived credibility of IPV victim-survivors. A central argument underlying their review is that humans are inherently wired to seek narratives and will simply disbelieve something if it cannot be told as a plausible story (e.g., László, 2008; Read & Miller, 1995). In fact, this reliance on clear and consistent narratives is fundamental to the evaluation of truth and evidence in legal proceedings (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000). This reliance, however, can systematically disadvantage victim-survivors of IPV, and populations that do not fit into traditional narratives of victimhood.

Epstein and Goodman (2019) argue that the plausibility of a victim-survivors' narrative is assessed based on internal and external consistency. Internally consistent narratives are clear, linear, and are logically coherent. However, IPV survivors often face systemic disadvantages in this respect, due to trauma-related impairments like PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or memory difficulties (Fitzgerald & Douglas, 2020; Epstein & Goodman, 2019). These impairments specifically hinder the ability to present linear, cohesive accounts. Further, criminal justice systems have traditionally relied on a violent incident model, which requires detailing discrete instances of abuse (Stark, 2012). This model has been argued to be fundamentally incompatible with the pervasive and coercive dynamics of IPV, where the abuse is repeated and interwoven (Wangmann, 2020).

Epstein & Goodman (2019) also emphasised that external consistency (i.e., how well a narrative aligns with the beliefs and worldviews of its audience) is crucial to credibility. Narratives that deviate from conventional expectations of a 'victim' are less likely to be believed (Goodmark, 2008). Some aspects of IPV victimisation can be counterintuitive, as illustrated by Epstein and Goodman, who quoted a judge that doubted a woman's account when she sought a civil protection order, stating "*Since I would not let that happen to me, I can't believe that it happened to you*" (Epstein & Goodman, 2019, p. 414).

Misconceptions about IPV persist in Australia, despite ongoing efforts to improve public awareness (Webster et al., 2018). A Parliament of Australia inquiry into IPV found that many victim-survivors viewed coercive control as the most harmful form of abuse they had endured (Wallace, 2021). However, despite this, being discredited and invalidated by the courts is an unfortunately common experience for Australian victim-survivors (Bluett-Boyd & Fileborn, 2014; Douglas, 2017; Herman, 2005). General public and legal expectations continue to prioritise physical violence, which can lead to diminished perceived credibility for victim-survivors who emphasise coercive and psychological abuse in legal settings (Epstein & Goodman, 2019). The introduction of coercive control offences in Australia reflects growing recognition of these challenges. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in understanding the barriers IPV victim-survivors face during forensic processes.

Despite gaslighting's established role in undermining victim-survivors' trust in their memories, perceptions, and their ability to articulate experiences (Hailes & Goodman, 2023), it has not yet been directly investigated for its potential impact on legal testimony. Given the legal systems' emphasis on clear, consistent, and linear narratives, gaslighting could potentially pose large barriers to internal consistency. Additionally, given gaslighting is less recognised as a form of IPV, victim-survivors may face reduced external consistency due to misunderstanding of its role and impacts. Both prior interviews with gaslighting victim-survivors (Sweet, 2019; Hailes, 2022) and the findings in Chapter 3 of this thesis, suggest that being discredited within legal systems is a common experience often accompanied by profound mental health consequences that further compound the harm experienced (Sweet, 2019). Therefore, understanding the unique impacts of gaslighting on how individuals reflect upon and evaluate their experiences is critical for developing appropriate supports, evaluations, and expectations in legal settings.

Chapter 5 of this thesis proposed a novel experimental paradigm to explore the impacts of gaslighting attempts on individuals' recollection and self-perceptions. This study aimed to provide new insights into the cognitive impacts of memory challenges in relationships, specifically examining how gaslighting tactics might disrupt recall, confidence, and self-perception. Through adapting memory conformity paradigms to reflect autobiographical memory challenges between close partners, the study investigated how social pressure influences susceptibility to misinformation and its relationship with self-trust.

Several key findings emerged from this study. First, the results indicate that pressure from close partners can amplify memory distortion and reduce confidence in recollection, highlighting the potential for abusive partners to strategically manipulate how individuals report or evaluate the accuracy of their accounts. This is also particularly noteworthy, as the "gaslighting" in this study only occurred once, whereas, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, gaslighting is often characterised by repetition, which wears down self-confidence over time. While future studies should explore the impact of repetition on recall in this paradigm, the current findings emphasise the significant role that normative pressure and intimacy play in gaslighting.

This conclusion was further reinforced by the lack of relationship between individual differences and acceptance of misinformation. The results suggest that, at least in early stages of manipulation, the social dynamics of being pressured by a close partner were more influential in altering recall than any individual trait. This aligns with the descriptions of victim-survivors and support service providers in Chapter 3, who emphasised the role of social and environmental factors in reinforcing gaslighting, rather than pre-existing personal dispositions. Therefore, practical interventions may benefit from focusing on identifying how intimate partners create situational pressures that encourage self-doubt and compliance, rather than emphasising individual vulnerabilities.

Additionally, this study uncovered unexpected findings regarding the relationship between memory, confidence, mood, and self-esteem. While misinformation acceptance increased and confidence decreased, self-esteem and mood improved. This suggests a complex process in which individuals navigate partner-led challenges to their recollections. The loss of confidence in specific event details, paired with increased self-esteem and trust in their broader memory abilities, may reflect temporary boosts associated with bonding and collaborative recall. However, these findings also underscore the potential for more insidious long-term effects, as repeated challenges could gradually erode an individuals' trust in their judgement. Further, it suggests that initial positive interactions between partners may mask early stages of gaslighting and manipulation.

While there are limitations to replicating the effects of complex forms of abuse in laboratory settings, investigating the impacts of persistent psychological abuse is critical given the importance placed on recall in forensic settings. This study represented a first attempt to replicate inter-partner gaslighting in an experimental setting, and further investigation is needed to develop actionable support for victim-survivors. Future directions for this paradigm may involve evaluating the effectiveness of various interventions designed to restore self-trust (e.g., exploring how interventions affect self-perceptions and external credibility assessments), as well as investigating the role of relationship dynamics identified in models of gaslighting (e.g., power dynamics, intimacy, social validation, communication patterns). Developing interventions that empower individuals to recognise manipulative patterns early, restore self-efficacy and trust, and improve forensic responses to survivors of psychological abuse will be essential.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Law and Policy Implications

Based on the findings across the chapters of this thesis, several considerations emerge for understanding legal and policy systems responses to gaslighting as a form of abuse, particularly within the broader context of coercive control. The covert and manipulative nature of gaslighting means that it can be difficult to identify within legislative frameworks that rely on incident-based models (Stark, 2012). While there is a global shift across multiple areas of law, criminal, civil, and family, towards recognising patterns of abusive behaviours and their cumulative impacts (e.g., the development of coercive control offences; EIGE, 2021), these laws remain relatively new and generate debate about scope and application. In Australia, for example, recently introduced state coercive control offences have been scrutinised for how well they capture elements of coercive control (e.g., intent vs recklessness) and for their potential to disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (Buxton-Namisnyk et al., 2022).

As discussed in Chapter 2, gaslighting is an inherently reality-distorting form of abuse that operates through plausible deniability and the avoidance of responsibility. How gaslighting is recognised within legal proceedings, whether in criminal law, protection order frameworks, or family law, depends on the threshold applied in a given jurisdiction. For instance, the UK's *Serious Crime Act 2015* uses the standard that a perpetrator “knows or ought to have known” their behaviour would cause harm, illustrating a more flexible approach in contexts where intent is difficult to prove. In contrast, debates in jurisdictions such as NSW highlight how a stronger emphasis on proving intent can limit the extent to which subtle, repetitive psychological abuse, such as gaslighting, fits within certain legislative formulations of coercive control (McDonough, 2022). These examples are offered to demonstrate how differing legal approaches shape the practical recognition of gaslighting, rather than to advocate for any particular model or reform direction.

Improved training for law enforcement, judicial actors, and frontline service providers is essential to ensure psychological abuse, including gaslighting, is recognised and addressed effectively across all relevant legal and institutional contexts. Chapter 3 highlighted the systemic vulnerabilities that allow perpetrators to exploit social expectations and biases, often portraying victims as unreliable or unstable. Enhancing professional awareness of the behavioural indicators of gaslighting, both in perpetrators and victim-survivors, may mitigate these biases and improve outcomes for victim-survivors engaging with formal support systems. Specialised training on identifying subtle psychological abuse can support more consistent application of existing laws and reduce the risk of institutional responses inadvertently reinforcing harm (e.g., Sweet, 2019).

Finally, it is important in practice to prioritise consistent and actionable definitions of gaslighting and related forms of abuse. While this thesis does not propose legal definitions, clearer conceptualisations are valuable for ensuring that victim-survivors can articulate their experiences and that legal and service-system actors can better recognise the patterns involved. As discussed in Chapter 2, attention to how definitions are operationalised, whether for investigative practice, risk assessment, or service provision, is crucial to ensuring that both overt and less overt forms of gaslighting are understood within existing legal frameworks. Further research into the cultural, social, and interpersonal dynamics of gaslighting remains essential, particularly to ensure that legal and policy applications do not disproportionately impact marginalised communities who already face elevated risks under current legislation (Buxton-Namisnyk et al., 2022). Addressing these inequities can help ensure a more equitable and effective response to gaslighting and coercive control across diverse contexts.

Public Awareness Implications

It is essential that government approaches addressing coercive and psychologically abusive behaviours go beyond the legal domain and promote cultural shifts and community

initiatives. Prevention efforts should not only focus on legislative frameworks but emphasise the importance of fostering healthier relationships and supporting individuals at risk of or experiencing IPV. As discussed in Chapter 4, public awareness campaigns play a crucial role in changing societal perceptions of gaslighting and other forms of psychological abuse. By increasing public understanding of gaslighting as a specific form of abuse, campaigns can validate victim-survivors' experiences, encourage help-seeking behaviours, and strengthen community support networks (Webster et al., 2018).

Chapter 3 highlighted the vital role of informal support networks, such as friends, family, and colleagues, as they are often the first point of contact for victim-survivors. These networks can provide a counterbalance to the perpetrator's narrative control, as well as validation and support where formal systems fall short. However, many individuals within these networks lack the knowledge or confidence to identify gaslighting behaviours or respond appropriately. Public education targeting these informal networks can improve their ability to recognise manipulative patterns, provide meaningful validation, and guide victim-survivors toward additional resources and support.

A significant challenge in addressing gaslighting through public awareness lies in its insidious and covert nature. As described in Chapter 3, gaslighting often unfolds gradually and subtly, eroding the victim's sense of reality over time. This ambiguity, paired with the difficulty in discerning the perpetrator's intent, makes it challenging for both victim-survivors and bystanders to recognise. Public campaigns should therefore focus on identifying observable patterns of behaviours. Demonstrating concrete signs, such as consistent manipulation, isolation, and efforts to distort the victim's perception of events, can offer actionable guidance for recognising gaslighting in diverse contexts.

Further, public awareness campaigns must confront societal tolerance for psychological abuse as well as specific misconceptions about gaslighting. As demonstrated in Chapter 4,

while the young adults were familiar with the term ‘gaslighting’, there were misunderstandings and misconceptions about where the definitional boundaries began and ended. Widespread recognition of the term, without intentional education efforts, can dilute its meaning and reduce its effectiveness in describing serious abuse. To address this, public campaigns should clearly define gaslighting as a specific and harmful form of psychological abuse that is often intertwined with coercive control. Using real-life examples from IPV contexts can ground public understanding, ensuring that the term retains its gravity and challenge misconceptions about what constitutes an act of gaslighting.

For public awareness efforts to be impactful, they must adopt a multi-faceted and sustained approach. Short term campaigns are likely insufficient to drive meaningful cultural shifts regarding attitudes towards psychological abuse. Drawing on frameworks such as those advocated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), campaigns should target multiple levels of influence, including individual behaviours, community norms, and systemic factors. Educational programs in schools, for instance, can foster early recognition of manipulative behaviours. Additionally, campaigns should be tailored for specific cultural and demographic groups, in order to address unique barriers (Stanley et al., 2017). Consultation and collaboration with communities in the development of these campaigns is critical to ensure cultural relevance and effectiveness.

Another important consideration is the accessibility of public awareness initiatives. While recent efforts in Australia to increase campaigns on coercive control are important (e.g., NSW Government, 2024), these campaigns are often conducted online which limits their reach to vulnerable populations without reliable internet access. Expanding the avenues through which these campaigns are delivered, such as in-person workshops, school programs, community events, and traditional media, can enhance their accessibility and impact. Through addressing individual, relational, and societal dimensions of gaslighting, public awareness can

drive meaningful change outside of courts. It can improve recognition of abuse, empower victim-survivors and informal support networks, and challenge harmful myths and misconceptions. Ultimately, public awareness efforts have the potential to contribute to a broader cultural shift that views psychological abuse as a serious societal issue requiring collective action.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Each chapter of this thesis discussed the specific limitations of the relevant study, therefore, this section will discuss limitations of the thesis as a whole, and future directions for gaslighting research.

Expanding Future Research to Diverse Populations. The populations studied in this thesis, while providing valuable insights into diverse experiences of gaslighting, are not entirely comprehensive or representative. The qualitative studies conducted in Chapter 2 and 3 relied on data from a wide-range of victim-survivors and support service providers, using convenience and snowball sampling methods. While this approach was the most appropriate for developing initial insights into an under-researched area, it introduced potential sampling biases, as participants were already accessing IPV support services and were willing to identify and discuss their experiences as ‘gaslighting’. By requiring participants to self-identify their experiences as “gaslighting,” the thesis excludes victim-survivors who experience similar patterns of manipulation but do not use this terminology. The decision to recruit only those who used the term was intentional, as this thesis was not designed to measure the prevalence of gaslighting, nor to identify gaslighting through behavioural criteria, but rather to explore how the term is being taken up and understood by those who apply it to themselves. Nevertheless, this sampling strategy limits generalisability and reflects an early step toward mapping the construct. Further, while the respondents came from diverse backgrounds, there were no direct questions addressing cultural impacts or community-specific differences. This

includes the potential difference between perspectives of those who are currently in relationships that include gaslighting and those who have had time away from those relationships.

The two experimental studies were conducted with university students and their partners, representing a relatively young, educated, and predominantly female demographic. This limited participant range underscores the need for future research to expand beyond these groups to ensure that findings are generalisable to broader and more diverse populations, especially if the aim is to represent the interplay of specific individual, relational, and cultural impacts of gaslighting. As discussed in Chapter 3, cultural tools (e.g., gendered or relationship expectations) within communities can play a significant role in reinforcing gaslighting. Therefore, examining how gaslighting manifests and is experienced across various communities is essential to understand how the abuse is perpetuated and justified. Future research should aim to capture these nuanced dynamics to develop more targeted and effective interventions.

Using New Methodologies. Given the limited research on this topic, especially at the time this thesis was initiated, the studies presented here aimed to establish foundational insights into gaslighting as a form of abuse. The studies were designed as cross-sectional snapshots, providing initial representations of victim-survivor experiences and the complex dynamics of gaslighting. However, as this area of research evolves, more comprehensive methodologies are necessary to deepen understanding of specific aspects of gaslighting, such as its prevalence, its emergence within relationships, and the long-term effects. To date, there have been no large-scale prevalence studies systematically measuring how common gaslighting is or exploring whether it is more prevalent in specific populations or contexts. Future research should prioritise these questions.

In addition, research that examines how gaslighting emerges, the types of relationships in which it occurs, and its progression could help identify early indicators and inform intervention strategies. Studies that map gaslighting alongside other forms of abuse could also be valuable, as they may reveal how different abusive tactics overlap, amplify, and reinforce each other. Furthermore, investigating the long-term recovery process for victim-survivors of gaslighting is necessary to understand the ways in which people heal and the types of supports that are most effective. Finally, research into the effectiveness of various interventions and recovery tactics for those experiencing gaslighting is essential to develop evidence-based strategies for supporting victim-survivors.

Studying Perpetration. This thesis focused primarily on the perspectives of victim-survivors and support service providers. However, future research would benefit from exploring the perspective of perpetrators to better understand the relational and social dynamics of gaslighting. A deeper insight into the motivations and psychological factors driving gaslighting is essential for developing more effective interventions, particularly given the increasing emphasis on perpetrator accountability within the broader IPV field and efforts to unpack the ecological factors that enable and excuse abuse (Guerin & de Oliveira Ortolan, 2017). Gaslighting, like other forms of psychological abuse, operates within complex interpersonal dynamics, and understanding these dynamics requires investigating the experiences of both victims and perpetrators. Studying perpetration of gaslighting presents unique challenges, especially since perpetrators often refuse to acknowledge or take responsibility for their actions. It is unlikely that studies will locate individuals who actively identify as gaslighting perpetrators, and those who do may represent a specific subset of offenders. Despite these difficulties, future research would gain important insights by investigating the motivations behind gaslighting perpetration.

Application and Effectiveness of Interventions. While this thesis recommends several interventions, including public awareness campaigns, and improved policy frameworks, and legislative changes, it was outside the scope of this thesis to undertake empirical research on the implementation and effectiveness of these strategies. Future research should focus on evaluating the real-world impact of these gaslighting focused interventions. Specifically, it is crucial to assess whether public campaigns improve recognition of gaslighting and bystander intervention, reduce its prevalence, or enhance victim-survivors' willingness to seek help. Furthermore, studies should investigate the development and effectiveness of screening tools for frontline workers and authorities, aimed at identifying gaslighting within IPV cases. Another important area for future research is examining whether interventions influence societal attitudes, such as how juries perceive gaslighting victimisation in legal contexts when provided with guidance about realistic presentations of persistent psychological abuse. Understanding how these interventions perform in practice will be essential for refining strategies and ensuring that efforts to combat gaslighting are truly effective in reducing abuse and supporting victim-survivors.

Conclusion

This thesis has advanced the understanding of gaslighting within IPV and addressed critical gaps in the literature. Through a mixed-method approach, it has clarified the definitional boundaries of gaslighting, explored its social and ecological dynamics, examined its psychological and forensic implications, and emphasised the need for targeted systemic responses. These insights can contribute not only to academic discourse but also to practical efforts to address an insidious form of abuse that thrives on deniability.

Gaslighting presents unique challenges to recognition and intervention due to its covert and manipulative nature. This research has examined these challenges and considered how they intersect with existing legislative and policy frameworks, as well as with the practices of

frontline responders, judicial actors, and law enforcement. It also highlights the value of improved awareness and understanding of gaslighting, moving beyond generalised or colloquial uses of the term toward recognising its specific role within patterns of coercion and control. Such clarity can support professionals and communities in better identifying and responding to the experiences of victim-survivors within current systems.

While this thesis represents a significant step forward in the literature on gaslighting, more work remains to be done. Large-scale prevalence studies, research into perpetrator behaviour, and culturally specific analyses are critical to deepening our understanding of gaslighting and tailoring interventions to affected communities. Equally, the translation of gaslighting research into practice must be continually evaluated to ensure that responses align with the needs and lived experiences of victim-survivors.

In closing, this thesis has demonstrated the pervasive harm of gaslighting within IPV and the necessity of a coordinated, multi-layered response to confront it. By establishing a foundation through which to study gaslighting, informing directions for community and professional awareness, and challenging the limitations of existing policy and legislation, this thesis has produced a body of knowledge that can support the development of more effective and appropriate responses to this often-overlooked form of abuse.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Full Victim-Survivor and Support Service Provider Questionnaires

Victim-Survivor Questionnaire

Sample Identification:

1. Select the option that you identify with most strongly:
 - You are an individual who has personally been in a relationship where you experienced gaslighting
 - You are an individual who works with victims who have experienced gaslighting

Demographic Questions:

1. Age
2. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
3. Country of residence (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
4. Country of origin (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
5. Where you have lived the longest? (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
6. Ethnicity - *drop down menu displaying the following options:*

Tick all that apply:

 - Australian
 - Indigenous Australian
 - Torres Strait Islander
 - New Zealander
 - Caucasian
 - Asian
 - Indian
 - Middle Eastern
 - European
 - North American
 - South American

- African
 - Decline to Answer
 - Other (please specify)
8. Are you fluent in English?
- Yes/No

Open Ended Questions:

Answer the following questions while thinking about your personal experience with gaslighting:

1. How would you define gaslighting?
2. What behaviours do you associate with people who gaslight others?
3. What factors make gaslighting more likely to work (e.g., in the environment, victim, or perpetrator)?
4. What factors make gaslighting less likely to work (e.g., in the environment, victim, or perpetrator)?
5. How has gaslighting affected you? (e.g., psychologically, socially, physically)
6. What signs or behaviours would you look for in yourself to identify if you are experiencing gaslighting?
7. What signs or behaviours would you look for in someone else to identify if they are experiencing gaslighting?
8. What signs or behaviours would you look for in a relationship to identify if gaslighting is occurring?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Support Service Provider Questionnaire

Sample Identification:

1. Select the option that you identify with most strongly:
 - You are an individual who has personally been in a relationship where you experienced gaslighting
 - You are an individual who works with victims who have experienced gaslighting

Demographic Questions:

2. Age
3. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
4. Country of residence (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
5. Country of origin (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
6. Where you have lived the longest? (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
7. Ethnicity - *drop down menu displaying the following options:*

Tick all that apply:

- Australian
- Indigenous Australian
- Torres Strait Islander
- New Zealander
- Caucasian
- Asian
- Indian
- Middle Eastern
- European
- North American
- South American
- African
- Decline to Answer
- Other (please specify)

8. Are you fluent in English?
 - Yes/No
9. Job title:
10. Number of years working with victims of gaslighting?
11. Approximately how many victims of gaslighting have you worked with?

Open Ended Questions:

Answer the following questions while thinking about the cases of gaslighting that you have observed:

1. How would you define gaslighting?
2. What behaviours do you associate with people who gaslight others?
3. What factors make gaslighting more likely to work (e.g., in the environment, victim, or perpetrator)?
4. What factors make gaslighting less likely to work (e.g., in the environment, victim, or perpetrator)?
5. How does gaslighting affect victims? (e.g., psychologically, socially, physically)
6. What signs or behaviours would you look for in victims to identify if they are experiencing gaslighting?
7. What signs or behaviours would you look for in a relationship to identify if gaslighting is occurring?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B – Definitions Chapter Detailed Demographics Tables

Table S.1.

Expanded Victim-Survivor Demographics Across Groups

Sample Characteristics	Inductive				Deductive			
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender								
Women	78	97%			160	95%		
Men	2	3%			8	5%		
Age			42	9.37			42	10.26
Residence								
<i>Australia</i>	80	100%			168	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	71	89%			134	80%		
New Zealand	1	1%			5	3%		
Europe	6	7%			20	12%		
Asia	2	2%			3	2%		
Africa	0	0%			4	2%		
Middle East	0	0%			1	0.5%		
North America	0	0%			1	0.5%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	73	91%			148	88%		
New Zealand	1	1%			5	3%		
Europe	4	5%			11	7%		
Asia	2	2%			1	0.5%		
Africa		0%			2	1%		
Middle East		0%			0	0%		
North America		0%			1	0.5%		

Table S.2.*Ethnicity of All Victim-Survivor Participants*

Sample Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity		
Single ethnicity	181	73.0%
Multiple ethnicities	67	27.0%
Single Ethnicity		
Australian	144	79.6%
European	20	11.0%
Asian	5	2.8%
Indigenous Australian	5	2.8%
Middle Eastern	3	1.7%
New Zealander	3	1.7%
Māori	1	0.6%
Multiple Ethnicities		
	Frequency of Mention	
European	59	44.0%
Australian	57	42.5%
Indigenous Australian	7	5.2%
New Zealander	4	3.0%
Asian	4	3.0%
African	2	1.5%
Middle Eastern	1	0.7%

Note: As 'Australian' was provided as an ethnicity option in the survey, and Australia is a highly multi-cultural country, it is not possible to determine the exact ethnicity of the entire sample.

Appendix C – Model Chapter Detailed Demographics Tables

Table S.3.

Expanded Demographics of All Victim-Survivor Participants

Sample Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender				
Women	226	96%		
Men	9	4%		
Age			43	9.79
Residence				
Australia	235	100%		
Birth Location				
Australia	193	82%		
New Zealand	5	2%		
Europe	26	11%		
Asia	5	2%		
Africa	4	2%		
Middle East	1	0.5%		
North America	2	1%		
Longest Residing Location				
Australia	209	89%		
New Zealand	5	2%		
Europe	15	6%		
Asia	3	1%		
Africa	2	1%		
Middle East	0	0%		
North America	1	0.5%		

Table S.4.*Ethnicity of All Victim-Survivor Participants*

Sample Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity		
Single ethnicity	171	72.8%
Multiple ethnicities	64	27.2%
Single Ethnicity		
Australian	137	58.3%
European	19	8.1%
Asian	5	2.2%
Indigenous Australian	4	1.7%
Middle Eastern	3	1.3%
New Zealander	2	0.9%
Māori	1	0.4%
Multiple Ethnicities		
	Frequency of Mention	
European	57	44.9%
Australian	55	43.3%
Indigenous Australian	6	4.7%
New Zealander	4	3.1%
Asian	3	2.5%
African	1	0.8%
Middle Eastern	1	0.8%

Note: As 'Australian' was provided as an ethnicity option in the survey, it is not possible to determine the ethnicity of the entire sample.

Table S.5.

Representation of Victim-Survivor Demographics in Inductive and Deductive Groups Across All Questions

Sample Characteristics	Inductive				Deductive			
	Number of responses	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number of responses	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender								
Women	466	97%			550	95%		
Men	14	3%			30	5%		
Age			43	9.54			43	9.66
Residence								
Australia	480	100%			580	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	412	86%			465	80%		
Outside Australia	68	14%			115	20%		
Longest Residing								
Location	432	90%			513	88%		
Australia	48	10%			67	12%		
Outside Australia								

Note: 'Number of responses' refers to the total answers included in the inductive or deductive groups across all questions.

Table S.6.*Demographics of Victim-Survivor Participants Divided by Question*

Behaviours Question	Inductive				Deductive			
Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender								
Women	62	97%			164	96%		
Men	2	3%			7	4%		
Age			43	9.88			43	9.78
Residence								
Australia	64	100%			171	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	56	88%			137	80%		
Outside Australia	8	12%			34	20%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	58	91%			151	88%		
Outside Australia	6	9%			20	12%		
Impacts Question								
Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender								
Women	117	96%			86	96%		
Men	5	4%			4	4%		
Age			43	9.81			43	9.44
Residence								
Australia	122	100%			90	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	106	87%			70	78%		
Outside Australia	16	13%			20	22%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	112	92%			77	86%		
Outside Australia	10	8%			13	14%		

Facilitators Question	Inductive				Deductive			
Characteristics	n	%	M	SD	n	%	M	SD
Gender								
Women	54	98%			155	95%		
Men	1	2%			8	5%		
Age			44	9.31			43	9.70
Residence								
Australia	55	100%			163	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	49	89%			130	80%		
Outside Australia	6	11%			33	20%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	51	93%			142	87%		
Outside Australia	4	7%			21	13%		
Inhibitors Question	Inductive				Deductive			
Characteristics	n	%	M	SD	n	%	M	SD
Gender								
Women	111	99%			90	93%		
Men	1	1%			7	7%		
Age			43	8.80			43	10.07
Residence								
Australia	112	100%			97	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	95	85%			78	80%		
Outside Australia	17	15%			19	20%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	99	88%			87	90%		
Outside Australia	13	12%			10	10%		

Signs in Relationships Question Characteristics	Inductive				Deductive			
	n	%	M	SD	n	%	M	SD
Gender								
Women	124	98%			55	93%		
Men	3	2%			4	7%		
Age			43	9.94			43	9.12
Residence								
Australia	127	100%			59	100%		
Birth Location								
Australia	106	83%			50	85%		
Outside Australia	21	17%			9	5%		
Longest Residing Location								
Australia	112	88%			56	95%		
Outside Australia	15	12%			3	5%		

Appendix D – Vignette Study Full Demographics

Table S.7.

Demographics of Sample

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender				
Female:	443	74.5%		
Male:	147	24.7%		
Non-Binary:	5	0.8%		
Age			19.6	4.0
Ethnicity				
Single Ethnicity:	390	65.6%		
Mixed Ethnicity:	202	34.0%		
Single Ethnicities:	Participant (n)			
Asian:	237	60.2%		
Australian:	85	21.6%		
European:	41	10.4%		
Middle Eastern:	15	3.8%		
African:	4	1.0%		
Indigenous Australian:	3	0.8%		
South American:	2	0.5%		
North American:	1	0.3%		
Decline to Answer:	2	0.5%		
Mixed Ethnicities	Frequency of Mention			
Australian:	165	33.1%		
European/Caucasian:	143	28.7%		
Asian:	89	17.8%		
Middle Eastern:	12	2.4%		
New Zealander:	11	2.2%		
African:	10	2.0%		
South American:	7	1.4%		
North American:	5	1.0%		
Indigenous Australian:	2	0.4%		
Pacific Islander:	2	0.4%		

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Region of Birth				
Australia	373	62.7%		
Asia	160	27.0%		
Europe	26	4.4%		
Africa	9	1.5%		
New Zealand	8	1.3%		
Middle East	8	1.3%		
North America	8	1.3%		
South America	3	0.5%		

Appendix E – Full List of Free Response Terms Provided in Vignette Study

Table S.8.

Frequency of Free Response Terms Provided by Participants

Free Response Term	Frequency	Free Response Term	Frequency
Gaslighting	339	Impatient	2
Manipulation	56	Irresponsible	2
Blame shifting/false accusations	33	Toxic	2
Verbal abuse	13	Arrogant	1
Projecting	12	Authoritative	1
Abuse	7	Bullying	1
Aggressive	6	Childish	1
Angry/hot tempered	5	Cold	1
Belittling	5	Condescending	1
Controlling	4	Contempt	1
Displacement	4	Disregarding	1
Disrespectful	3	Harsh	1
Emotional abuse/manipulation	4	Ignorant	1
Rude	4	Insecurity	1
Deflection	3	Intimidation	1
Lying	3	Invalidating	1
Excessive/overreaction	3	Irrational	1
Unreasonable/unfair	3	Memory test	1
Scapegoating	2	Misunderstanding	1
Deprecating/degrading	2	Rationalising	1
Guilt-tripping	2	Undermining	1

Appendix F – Vignette Questionnaire

Step 1: PIS is shown

Step 2: Pre-Vignette Demographics Questions

1. Age
2. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
3. Country of birth (*drop down menu displaying all countries A – Z*)
4. Ethnicity - *drop down menu displaying the following options:*

Tick all that apply:

Australian

Indigenous Australian

Torres Strait Islander

New Zealander

Caucasian

Asian

Indian

Middle Eastern

European

North American

South American

African

Decline to Answer

Other (please specify)

5. How proficient are you in English? (5-point Likert scale with these options)

- 0 No proficiency: I can only understand a few words.
- 1 Basic requirements: I can form basic sentences, such as asking simple questions.

- 2 Minimum proficiency: I can have simple conversations about a few different topics.
- 3 Basic proficiency: I can have conversations about many topics and talk at a normal speed.
- 4 Proficiency: I can discuss a wide range of topics easily, at a normal speed with very few mistakes.
- 5 Native proficiency: I was raised speaking English.

Step 3: Vignette is shown, along with this instruction:

“You are about to be shown a short fictional story about a couple, Tom and Jennifer. Please read through the story carefully, and pay attention, as you will be asked questions about it afterwards.”

Step 4: Post-Vignette Questions

6. These are some quick questions to check if you were paying attention to the story.

Please select the most correct answer.

- What were Tom and Jennifer celebrating?
 - o Their first anniversary, Tom’s birthday, The holidays, Jennifer’s new job
- Who eventually took the chicken out of the oven?
 - o Tom, Jennifer, No one, A friend
- What did Jennifer offer at the end of the story?
 - o To cook a new meal, To pay for takeaway, To buy Tom a gift, To fix the chicken

7. How acceptable do you think this interaction between Tom and Jennifer was for a healthy relationship?

- *6-point Likert scale between ‘not acceptable’ and ‘acceptable’*

8. How serious do you find this interaction was between Tom and Jennifer?

- *6-point Likert scale between ‘not at all serious’ and ‘very serious’*

9. If you witnessed this interaction between Tom and Jennifer, how strongly would you feel the need to say something to them?

- 6-point Likert scale between 'no need at all' and 'strong need to say something'

10. Can you think of a term that describes what Tom was doing to Jennifer?

- No
- Yes (please write answer)

11. Do you know what gaslighting is?

- If answer yes
 - Which of these components, do you think are **necessary** to include in the definition of gaslighting? (Include checkbox list with the following options)
 - Person A challenges Person B's ability to perceive reality.
 - Person B begins to question their ability to perceive reality.
 - Person A's behaviour towards Person B is intentional (i.e., intentionally causes Person B to question reality).
 - Person A's behaviour towards Person B is a pattern (i.e., repeated behaviour).
 - Person A attempts to isolate Person B from other people and sources of information.
 - Person A has some form of power (e.g., authority, financial, status) over Person B.
 - Person A and Person B are close to one another (e.g., partner, friend, family).
 - Person A makes comments that are hurtful to Person B.
 - Person A uses emotional manipulation to hurt Person B.
 - Person A uses physical intimidation to hurt Person B.
 - Person A actively listens to Person B's concerns.
 - Person B feels confident and supported in the relationship.
 - Person A and Person B feel mutual affection.
 - Other (please specify)
- If answer no, move on to next question.

12. Gaslighting Questionnaire shown

13. *Gaslighting can be broadly defined as a tactic of psychological manipulation in which an individual attempts to control their partner by convincing them that they do not have the ability to think, remember, and reason for themselves. Do you think gaslighting happened between Tom and Jennifer in this scenario?*

- (6-point Likert Scale between 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree')

14. Please answer these brief questions about the vignette you read.

- Did Tom lie to Jennifer on purpose? (yes/no)
- Was this the first time Tom has done this to Jennifer? (yes/no)
- Did Jennifer argue back when Tom said she was supposed to take the chicken out? (yes/no)

Step 5: Data Consent Form is shown

End of survey.

Appendix G – Vignettes

Note: This is the vignette provided to the participants in the vignette study. There are eight versions of the vignettes, which only differ on three variables – whether it is ‘repeated vs once’, ‘intentional vs not intentional’, and whether the gaslightee ‘agrees or disagrees’.

Tom and Jennifer stand in their cosy kitchen, as they prepare a roast chicken dinner together for their one-year anniversary. Tom is a meticulous planner and likes to follow the recipe step-by-step. While Jennifer takes more of a carefree approach to cooking, she understands that Tom prefers to be in charge and lets him delegate the cooking tasks. Tom has taken on the bulk of the work but has left Jennifer in charge of taking the chicken out of the oven when it is ready.

As Jennifer is keeping an eye on the slow count down of the cooking timer, Tom yells out “I’m almost finished with everything else, so I’ll take the chicken out of the oven when it’s done”. Jennifer agrees, and with nothing else to do, she begins setting the table. As she is cleaning the table and setting up for the meal, the smell of smoke begins to seep into the room. Immediately after, Jennifer hears the smoke alarm go off, along with a string of angry swear words coming from the kitchen.

Jennifer runs into the kitchen to see Tom pulling a burnt chicken out of the oven. “What happened?!” asks Jennifer, as Tom places the chicken into the bin. “What happened is that you forgot to take the chicken out of the oven. That’s what happened” spat out Tom, clearly livid as he throws the oven mitts onto the counter in front of Jennifer. **Tom knows that he told Jennifer not to worry about the chicken, but he is feeling angry and embarrassed for forgetting (*intentional condition*) / Tom swears that he remembers tasking Jennifer with overseeing the chicken (*not intentional condition*).** “This is why I never let you cook, you’re incompetent and have no sense of organisation”.

This isn't the first time that this type of argument has happened. Jennifer feels as if she has been accused of making these kinds of mistakes all the time, although she doesn't always remember making them (*repeated condition*) / This kind of thing has never happened before. Tom and Jennifer are usually on the same page and rarely get into arguments (*once condition*).

She thought she remembered being told not to worry about the chicken, but she figures she must have been mistaken. She figures that since Tom was so sure and she's clearly been so forgetful recently, it's likely that it was her fault. "I'm so sorry, Tom, I'm just so forgetful. I can't believe I've ruined our anniversary dinner". "Whatever" huffs Tom, as he throws the rest of the half-finished food into the bin. Jennifer pauses to think (*agree condition*) / Jennifer is quite confused because she definitely remembers being told not to worry about the chicken. "What are you talking about Tom, you said you were going to take the chicken out of the oven". "No, I didn't, you just forgot as per usual" huffs Tom, as he throws the rest of the half-finished food into the bin. Jennifer bites her tongue and pauses to think (*disagree condition*)

"How about you order some takeaway? I'll pay for it", she offers. Tom shrugs his shoulders and storms out of the kitchen, leaving Jennifer to finish cleaning up the mess.

Appendix H – The Gaslighting Questionnaire

The following questionnaire comes directly from March et al., 2023.

The Gaslighting Questionnaire

Below are a series of scenarios that might happen in a romantic relationship between two people. We will refer to the two people in this relationship as Person A and Person B. For the following items, please rate how acceptable you find each scenario:

1 = Unacceptable, 2 = Slightly Unacceptable, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Slightly Acceptable, 5 = Acceptable

I think it is acceptable for ...

1. Person A tries to make Person B question their sanity
2. Person A makes Person B question their decision-making abilities, if it means Person A gets to be the one to make decisions in the relationship
3. Person A accuses Person B of lying, even when Person A knows that they are the one who is lying
4. Person A never admits to doing anything wrong, even when Person B has proof that Person A did do something wrong
5. Person A says anything to Person B if it means that they will get their way
6. Person A lashes out at Person B whenever Person B says something that contradicts Person A's version of events
7. Person A tells Person B that they are wrong, even when Person A knows that what Person B is saying is true
8. Person A accuses Person B of being paranoid, even if Person A knows that Person B's suspicions are well-founded
9. Person A says Person B has a bad memory if Person B catches Person A telling a lie
10. Person A lies to Person B just to see if Person B will believe them

Appendix I – Partner Experiment Full Memory Questionnaires

Session 1 Memory Questionnaire

Identification Question:

1. What is your participant number?

Demographic Questions:

1. Age
2. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
3. Cultural affiliation (open ended)
4. Are you fluent in English?
 - Yes/No
5. What is your relationship with the person you are paired with in this study?
 - Couple
 - Friends
6. How many years or months have you known the person you are paired with in this study?
7. How well do you know your partner (between 1 and 10)?

Memory Questions:

- First outing together
- First time you met
- The last time you had dinner together
- The last time you had lunch together
- Most recent birthday you celebrated together
- Most recent zoom meeting you had together
- Most recent exercise you have done together
- Most recent party you have attended together
- Most recent outing together
- Other – please specify

You were requested to choose four memory prompts with your partner prior to completing this survey (see list of prompts above). Please answer the following questions about those four memories alone:

Memory 1:

1. Which memory did you choose?
2. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
3. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - (between 0 – 100%)

Memory 2:

1. Which memory did you choose?
2. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
3. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - (between 0 – 100%)

Memory 3:

1. Which memory did you choose?
2. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
3. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - (between 0 – 100%)

Memory 4:

1. Which memory did you choose?
2. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
3. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - (between 0 – 100%)

Session 2 Memory Questionnaire (Post-Exercise)

Identification Question:

1. What is your participant number?

Memory Questions:

- First outing together
- First time you met
- The last time you had dinner together
- The last time you had lunch together
- Most recent birthday you celebrated together
- Most recent zoom meeting you had together
- Most recent exercise you have done together
- Most recent party you have attended together
- Most recent outing together
- Other – please specify

You have just discussed four of these memory prompts with your partner. Please answer the following questions about those four memories:

Memory 1:

4. Which memory did you choose?
5. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
6. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - i. (between 0 – 100%)
7. What is your reason for this rating?

Memory 2:

4. Which memory did you choose?
5. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
6. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - i. (between 0 – 100%)
7. What is your reason for this rating?

Memory 3:

4. Which memory did you choose?
5. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
6. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - ii. (between 0 – 100%)
7. What is your reason for this rating?

Memory 4:

4. Which memory did you choose?
5. Please write everything you remember about this memory (e.g. what time was it, where were you, what were you wearing, were there other people present?)
6. How confident are you that your recount is accurate?
 - iii. (between 0 – 100%)
7. What is your reason for this rating?

Final Questions:

1. What do you think this study was about? (open ended)
2. Did you discuss the four memories with your partner between the first session (on zoom) and this session? (open ended)

Appendix J – Memory Coding Manual for Partner Experiment

Coding Recall Changes (Target Specific)

The coder should add one count for every target change that appears in recall (time 2). That is, do any of the central or peripheral changes inserted by the experimenter appear in the written recall (time 2). Peripheral and Central challenges should be tallied in separate columns in the spreadsheet, and their total summed up in a separate column.

Important:

- If the participant writes that they noticed the change but are unsure of whether it is true – this does not count as ‘accepting’ the change. Instead, it should be coded as *‘noticing the change’* (see coding instructions for ‘noticing’ the change below)
- If the participant changes the grain size to account for the two options (original detail and changed detail), they are technically not taking on the change (see coding instructions for *grain size* below)
 - If they change the *grain size* – and it doesn’t include the original detail, then add one count for taking on the change, and one count for grain size.
- If a participant offers up two options that consist of the original detail, and the changed detail – this should not be coded as ‘accepting’ the change. Instead, it should be coded as *‘Incompatible alternatives.’*
 - However, if someone poses two alternatives that do not consist of the original detail, this counts as taking the change on.
 - E.g., Time 1 response = 11am, Time 2 response = 1 or 2 pm

Coding Recall Omissions (Target Specific)

The coder should add one count for every target change that is omitted in recall (time 2). That is, are any of the central or peripheral changes inserted by the experimenter omitted entirely

from the written recall (time 2). Peripheral and Central omissions should be tallied in separate columns in the spreadsheet, and their total summed up in a separate column.

Example: if the time was changed from 11am to 2pm, but instead of recalling either of these two options, the respondent doesn't mention the time at all.

Important:

- If the change was not included in time 1, or in time 2 – then that does not count as an omission.

Coding Hedging words (General)

The coder should add one count for every hedge word used by the respondent. Hedge words are used to indicate uncertainty, and probability. Examples of hedge words are “I think, maybe, possibly, probably, likely, pretty much, roughly, fairly sure, about, around”.

Examples: “I’m pretty sure it was the morning” or “maybe I was wearing a red shirt” or “It was around 5 pm”

These hedge words do not need to be specific to the target – code for any hedge words that appear in the text.

Coding Grain Size (Target Specific)

Grain size refers to the level of precision in a statement, with more precision indicating a smaller (precise) grain size, and less precision indicating a larger (coarse) grain size (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2008). The coder should add one count for each use of a larger grain size to discuss previously specific detail (previously smaller grain size).

Example: Participant discussed the specific time of day in recall (time 1) but discussed the vague time of day in recall (time 2).

- E.g., Time 1: “it was at 10am” (small grain size); Time 2: “it was in the morning”.
(large grain size)

Important:

- If the respondent increases the grain size, but it doesn't cover their original response, then this will count as a change as well as grain size (1 mark for both columns)
 - Example: The original time was 11am, and the changed time was 3pm. The respondent says, “it was in the afternoon”. This would count as taking on the change as well as increasing grain size.

Coding Incompatible Alternatives (Target Specific)

Incompatible alternatives consist of offering up two alternatives that cannot coexist e.g., It was either in the morning or afternoon. The coder should add one count to every alternative options phrase used by the participant to refer to the target change, that is not covered by the ‘changes’ code (explained above in changes category).

Coding Explicit Mention of Not Remembering (Target Specific)

The coder should add one count for every time the participant explicitly states a lack of remembering the target detail in Time 2. Examples of this would consist of “I don't know”, “I can't remember”.

Important:

- If they indicated that they didn't remember the same detail the first time, this does not count as an explicit mention not remembering (as it hasn't changed across memory recounts)

Coding ‘Noticing’ the Target Changes (Target Specific)

The coder should add one count for every time the participant mentions that there were changes introduced by their partner that they didn’t personally recall. This code should be coded into two categories. There is a column for the two separate categories, and a third column for the total.

1. Noticing changes – and accepting them

- Example of noticing changes – and accepting them: “My partner said it was in the afternoon, so we must have met then”.

2. Noticing changes – and not accepting them.

- Example of noticing changes – and not accepting them: “My parent said it was in the afternoon, but I know we met in the morning”.

Important:

- If the participant notices the change and then accepts it – this counts as a change, put a count in both the change column and the noticing the change column.
- If the participant says ‘I’m not sure if that’s right’, this counts as not accepting the change. Only place a count in the ‘noticing changes - and not accepting’