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The Sociology of Gaslighting

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Abstract

Gaslighting—a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel "crazy," creating a "surreal" interpersonal environment—has captured public attention. Despite the popularity of the term, sociologists have ignored gaslighting, leaving it to be theorized by psychologists. However, this article argues that gaslighting is primarily a sociological rather than a psychological phenomenon. Gaslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships. The theory developed here argues that gaslighting is consequential when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes and structural and institutional inequalities against victims to manipulate their realities. Using domestic violence as a strategic case study to identify the mechanisms via which gaslighting operates, I reveal how abusers mobilize gendered stereotypes; structural vulnerabilities related to race, nationality, and sexuality; and institutional inequalities against victims to erode their realities. These tactics are gendered in that they rely on the association of femininity with irrationality. Gaslighting offers an opportunity for sociologists to theorize under-recognized, gendered forms of power and their mobilization in interpersonal relationships.

Keywords

gaslighting, domestic violence, gender, sexuality, intersectionality

George Cukor's 1944 film *Gaslight*[1] tells the story of Paula (Ingrid Bergman) and her new husband Gregory (Charles Boyer), who sets about the task of isolating her and making her believe she is insane. His eponymous tactic is to dim and brighten the gaslights and then insist she is imagining it. Gregory aims to undermine Paula's sense of self and everyday life, to confuse and distort her reality such that she must accept his imposed reality in place of her own.

Today, gaslighting is an increasingly ubiquitous term used to describe the mind-manipulating strategies of abusive people, in both politics and interpersonal relationships. Dozens of online checklists instruct readers on the "warning signs" of gaslighting in their intimate relationships. A second edition of Robin Stern's bestselling 2007 book *The Gaslight Effect* was released in 2018, and the new version considers how psychological manipulation dominates the "post-truth" political era. *The Guardian*'s Ariel Leve wrote an article in 2017 titled, "Trump is Gaslighting America." Psychotherapist Stephanie Sarkis, whose popular book *Gaslighting* came out in 2018, makes a similar argument. Gaslighting was even made an official part of criminal domestic violence law in the United Kingdom in 2015, and more than 300 people have since been charged with the offense (Mikhailova 2018).

Despite its growing recognition as an abusive power tactic, sociologists have ignored

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gaslighting, leaving it for psychologists to study. This, I argue, is a mistake. Gaslighting is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Engaging in abusive mental manipulation certainly involves psychological dynamics, but scholars have thus far disregarded the *social* characteristics that actually give gaslighting its power. Specifically, gaslighting is effective when it is rooted in social inequalities, especially gender and sexuality, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships. When perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes, structural inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims with whom they are in an intimate relationship, gaslighting becomes not only effective, but devastating.

This article develops a sociological theory of gaslighting using in-depth analysis of life story interviews with women attending domestic violence support groups. I define gaslighting as a set of attempts to create a "surreal" (Ferraro 2006) social environment by making the other in an intimate relationship seem or feel "crazy." I argue that gaslighting tactics become consequential when abusers mobilize macro-level inequalities related to gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and class against an intimate other. By consequential, I mean that such tactics damage victims' sense of reality, autonomy, mobility, identity, and social supports.

Unlike psychological approaches to gaslighting, a sociological theory of gaslighting must show how macro-level social inequalities are transformed into micro-level strategies of abuse. Decades of research reveal that no form of abuse can be extracted from social context: anyone can use manipulative tactics against anyone else, but such actions only transform victims' lives—becoming abusive (Stark 2010)—when they are embedded in relations of power. The theoretical framework offered here has two layers.

First, gaslighting works when deployed in power-unequal intimate relationships, creating an environment of "surreality." Second, gaslighting works when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims. This second point is critical because women do not typically have the cultural, economic, and political capital necessary to gaslight men—gaslighting is therefore a gendered phenomenon. In fact, whether or not it is exercised by a male-bodied person against a female-bodied person, gaslighting tactics construct victims in terms of feminized irrationality.

Recent survey data suggest that gaslighting is common in domestic violence situations, preventing women from accessing resources (Warshaw et al. 2014). As my analysis shows, gaslighting can amplify the dangers already present in abused women's lives. Gaslighting can also prevent domestic violence victims from accessing institutional resources that would help them escape the abuse. Indeed, the very institutions set up to help victims can become part of the gaslighting process. Gaslighting should be of interest to sociologists, then, because domestic violence is widespread and gaslighting is a core feature of intimate abuse.

Yet, the importance of gaslighting for sociologists extends well beyond the case of domestic violence: first, gaslighting occurs in other types of interpersonal relationships, creating and exacerbating power imbalances; second, accepting purely psychological approaches to gaslighting risks the proliferation of context-free analyses; and finally, gaslighting exposes how the association of women with irrationality exacerbates existing gender and sexual inequalities. A theory of gaslighting therefore offers an opportunity for sociologists to identify and analyze underrecognized, gendered forms of power and their mobilization in interpersonal relationships across a range of situations.

TOWARD A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF GASLIGHTING

Psychological Accounts of Gaslighting

Despite the recent journalistic use of gaslighting to name Trump's political strategy, gaslighting is traditionally understood as an interpersonal, psychological dynamic. In fact, psychotherapists popularized the term.

Barton and Whitehead are thought to have coined "gaslighting" in a 1969 *Lancet* paper that analyzed involuntary hospitalization as a form of abuse.[2] The term then appeared a handful of times in the psychotherapeutic literature during the 1970s and 1980s (Calef and Weinshel 1981; Gass and Nichols 1988; Smith and Sinanan 1972). However, "gaslighting" seems to have fallen out of use until psychotherapist Robin Stern popularized it in her 2007 book, which holds that gaslighting is a phenomenon of "mutual participation" between "gaslighter" (perpetrator) and "gaslightee" (victim). She writes, "The first step is to become aware of your own role in gaslighting, the ways in which your own behavior, desires, and fantasies may be leading you to idealize your gaslighter and seek his approval" (Stern [2007] 2018:xxvii).

Although Stern claims that gaslighting is gender-neutral, nearly all her case studies involve a heterosexual male partner as gaslighter and a woman as gaslightee. Stern places responsibility on the "gaslightee" to fix or get out of the relationship. Psychological uses of gaslighting like Stern's highlight the importance of intimate relationships in gaslighting, but they ignore the gender-based structural conditions that make gaslighting possible, and they fail to locate gaslighting as a common feature of domestic violence.

IPV Literature and Allusions to Gaslighting

In contrast, the intimate partner violence (IPV) literature does not regularly use the term "gaslighting," yet it offers extensive evidence that gaslighting is gendered and is common in abusive relationships. Gaslighting emerges as a sense of "surreality," confusion, and distortion systematically experienced by victims. For example, Ferraro (2006:73) describes what she calls "surreality," showing how abusers "spin tales" that violate victims' sense of reality, distorting their perceptions of everything from minor details of everyday life to their partners' entire biographies. Williamson (2010:1418) describes domestic violence as "unreality," because abusers consistently attempt to determine the boundaries of victims' realities. Johnson (2008:9) writes, "It's her crazy behavior . . . that requires him to control her . . . she's [really] the abusive partner. She's so out of touch with reality that maybe she should get some help." Dobash and Dobash's (1979:105) landmark study references abusers' consistent construction of women as "exaggerating" and making up the violence; abusers in their study even invented tales of wives' infidelities and tried to convince their wives the stories were true. According to Richie (2012:43), these manipulations create a "hostile social environment" that feels disorienting. In short, although IPV scholars do not theorize these "crazy-making" tactics as a specific phenomenon, they clearly recognize them as endemic to abuse.

This overview indicates that gaslighting is ubiquitous but under-theorized as a distinct phenomenon in IPV research. The IPV literature overwhelmingly situates "crazy-making" tactics within the broader context of "intimate terrorism" (Johnson 2006, 2008),[3] "coercive control" (Stark 2007), and psychological abuse.[4] Physical violence is part of establishing control, scholars note, but so are tactics such as emotional abuse, humiliation, and isolation (Anderson 2008, 2010; Dutton, Goodman, and Bennett 1999; Giordano et al. 2016; Hardesty et al. 2015; Johnson, Leone, and Xu 2014; Kimmel 2002; Myhill 2015; Reed et al. 2010; Stark and Hester 2019; Tanha et al. 2010). Psychological abuse exerts control by micro-regulating victims' everyday lives, self-concepts, and sense of reality (Hardesty et al. 2015; Murphy and Hoover 1999; Myhill 2017; Piipsa 2002). IPV research further shows that psychological control tactics are used more commonly and effectively by men against women (Hester et al. 2017; Kelly and Westmarland 2016; Myhill 2015; Tanha et al. 2010),[5] and that in the long term, psychological abuse affects victims more negatively than does physical abuse (Anderson 2009; Dutton and Goodman 2005; Ferraro 2006; Hester et al. 2017; Murphy and Hoover 1999; O'Leary 1999; Strauchler et al. 2004).

However, gaslighting is not yet understood as distinct from other types of psychological

abuse, such as humiliation. This is a significant oversight, as there is growing consensus that it is necessary to parse *types* of abuse and their socio-structural conditions (Myhill 2015; Stark 2010). As Johnson (2008:3) writes, researchers should "take apart" the dynamics of abuse to understand the "web" that entraps women. As my data suggest, when abusers successfully make victims feel "crazy," victims become especially vulnerable to institutional abuse and less likely to rely on institutional supports. As such, I argue that we need to parse "gaslighting" as a specific type of psychological abuse in order to understand the social dynamics that make gaslighting effective, as well as the consequences it engenders.

The best quantitative data available provide evidence that gaslighting is a startlingly common feature of domestic violence. A survey conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) in 2014 asked 2,500 hotline callers about their experiences of coercion (Warshaw et al. 2014). Respondents were adult women who had experienced domestic violence, called the hotline, and agreed to participate in the survey. In response to the question, "Do you think your partner or ex-partner has ever deliberately done things to make you feel like you are going crazy or losing your mind," 73.8 percent answered positively. And in response to the question, "Has your partner or ex-partner ever threatened to report to authorities that you are 'crazy' to keep you from getting something you want or need," just over 50 percent of callers answered "yes." The descriptive results of this survey are staggering: nearly three-quarters of this sample of victims experienced gaslighting, and over half identified gaslighting as an obstacle to accessing support.

These data provide justification for the present study, but these methods fall short because they fail to help us understand abusive acts by their *ability to coerce* (Dutton and Goodman 2005). This failure is important because although women may use abusive tactics against male partners, men are less likely to be afraid of women and less likely to change their behavior in response (Anderson 2005; Ross 2012). In other words, fear, entrapment, and isolation are gendered outcomes (Anderson 2009; Dutton and Goodman 2005; Myhill 2015).

The IPV literature provides preliminary evidence that gaslighting is a common feature of controlling and coercive relationships, but it has not examined this specific style of psychological abuse or theorized its social conditions of possibility. We must therefore extend beyond the IPV literature to develop a sociological theory of gaslighting. After all, gaslighting is not *only* found in cases of domestic violence: gaslighting has captured public attention because it occurs in various kinds of relationships and because it refers to gendered cultural dynamics.

Gender Stereotypes and Intimate Relationships

Understanding gaslighting sociologically requires placing this phenomenon in its cultural, structural, and institutional contexts. Gender inequality is a condition of possibility for gaslighting: it deprives women of the social power that would allow them to define men's realities in this way (Anderson 2010; Richie 1996; Stark 2007).[6] This is not to say men never experience abuse or abusive tactics, but rather that gender inequality makes women more likely to be victimized than men (U.S. Department of Justice 2016).

Decades of social scientific research indicate that all forms of abuse between adults are more commonly used by men against women (CDC 2015; Kimmel 2002). In this sense, theorizing intimate violence requires attention to gender as structure, in addition to gender as an individual-level variable (Anderson 2005; Connell 1987; Martin 2004; Risman 2004). Gendered and sexual stereotypes, structural exclusions, and institutional discrimination create the conditions for violence (Anderson 2005; Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, and Johnson 2018; Richie 2012; Saguy 2003; Stark 2007). Even when violence is not used by a male-bodied person against a female-bodied person, scholars have shown that perpetrators *feminize* victims in order to execute intimate

forms of violence against them (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2004; Pascoe 2011). But how does gender matter for gaslighting specifically?

Answering this question requires paying attention to what gaslighting does: it systematically constructs victims as "crazy" and destabilizes their realities. The ability to leverage an accusation of "crazy" is gendered. The idea that women are overly emotional, irrational, and not in control of their emotions has a long history. Labeling women "crazy" is a key feature of the gender system, especially via institutions such as medicine and law (Barker 2009; Douglas 2012; Ehrenreich and English 1973; Figert 1996; Smart 1989).

Female victims of violence have long been portrayed as irrational in court and other legal settings, labeled with conditions such as "battered women's syndrome" (Ferraro 2003; Rothenberg 2002). Schur (1984) argues that women's behavior is presumed to lack reason, casting femininity itself as deviant. Metzl (2003) shows how women represent lack of reason and rationality in medical history. Kempner (2014) finds that the medical construction of women as hysterical continues to allow experts to treat women's pain as illegitimate. The history of the psy- sciences also reflects this association of femininity with irrationality and childishness (Shields 2007). As Littlejohn (2013:847) writes, "Men have historically been seen as rational beings with the ability to control their emotions, but women's emotion has been seen as 'dangerously unregulated.'"

McKim (2008:309) finds that in addiction programs, women's selves are constructed as "profoundly deficient and irrational" compared to men's. Women are thought to be overly emotional in various spheres of social life, including the workplace (Blum and Stracuzzi 2004; Connell 1995; Martin 2003). Lack of intellectual control is also racialized and classed: claims to rational, conscious emotions are therefore claims to status and power (Shields 2007).

Still, the idea that women lack rationality may seem like an outdated trope. After all, women in the United States have made significant gains in education and labor market participation, and gender role stereotypes have become less rigid (Adams and Bettis 2003; Randles 2018). Yet, a central paradox in the sociology of gender is that although women as a group have gained mobility, gender inequality in intimate relationships persists (England 2010; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Scarborough and Risman 2017; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). Sociologists have found that romantic relationships are the arena in which traditional gender ideologies are upheld most strongly (Dalessandro and Wilkins 2017; England 2010; Lamont 2014). The literature on the "stalled" gender revolution thus suggests that intimate relationships are precisely the place to look for the ongoing animation of traditional ideologies that cast women as emotionally untethered.

Indeed, evidence from non-abusive heterosexual relationships indicates that women are regularly constructed as irrational and overly emotional. Young people express a desire for gender equality in romantic relationships, but stereotypes persist about men as autonomous and in control versus emotionally unstable and dependent women (Dalessandro and Wilkins 2017; Ezzel 2012; Lamont 2014). Women report fear of seeming excessively emotional in intimate relationships with men, and they experience a lack of power over the trajectory of those relationships as a result (Lamont 2014). Traditional gender ideologies, especially those around emotionality, are thus "remarkably resilient" in romantic relationships (Lamont 2014:190).

What we know about the micro-dynamics of abusive heterosexual relationships also provides evidence for the persistent association of femininity with irrationality. Micro-regulations of feminine performance (e.g., clothing) are key to coercive control (Anderson 2009). Abusers regulate women's bodies by controlling access to birth control and abortion (Barber et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2010). Research with male perpetrators further shows that abusive men hold traditional gender role ideologies (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Yamawaki, Ostenson, and Brown 2009) and tend to construct their female partners as unreasonable (Schrock, McCabe, and Vaccaro 2017).

Anderson and Umberson (2001) find that male perpetrators describe their partners as ridiculous, overwrought, and silly. Women in abusive relationships report being encouraged by their abusers to think of themselves as "stupid" and "crazy" (Enander 2010). Williamson (2010) recounts the story of an abuser who broke his wife's arm on their honeymoon and then told friends and family that she was walking drunkenly in high heels when she fell and injured herself. Feminine performance (clothing) and carelessness (drinking) became his weapons as he successfully drew on the association of femininity with irrationality to "flip" the story. The dynamics of abuse function, at least in part, through ideologies that associate femininity with irrationality.

Thus, gender stereotypes, in addition to material gender inequalities, must be made central to any understanding of gaslighting. Research suggests intimate relationships are an especially salient place in which to find enactments of traditional gender stereotypes, especially around women's excessive emotionality. But these stereotypes are not mobilized in isolation from other social factors. I turn to the literature on intersecting forms of structural and institutional inequality to build toward a socially situated explanation of gaslighting.

Intersectional and Institutional Inequalities

Intersectional scholarship reveals that racial discrimination, immigration policy, and poverty shape the dynamics of abuse and its effects (Ferraro 2006; Menjívar 2011; Miller 2008; Richie 1996; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). "Everywoman" is not equally likely to be abused (Richie 2000, 2012). Rather, intersecting inequalities make women of color, poor women, immigrant women, and disabled women more vulnerable to abuse (Menjívar 2011; Miller 2008; Richie 2012). Race, class, and immigrant status are critical for understanding the intersectional context in which abuse differentially shapes victims' lives.[7]

Institutions such as police, housing programs, universities, and workplaces also affect how inequalities translate into intimate harm. Gendered and racialized patterns of discrimination and exclusion are institutionalized (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Brush 2011; Desmond and Valdez 2012; McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012); "gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power" in all kinds of institutions (Acker 1992:567). Universities are gendered institutions allowing for "party rape" to occur (Armstrong et al. 2006). High schools reinforce ideologies allowing masculinity to be accomplished via the denigration of femininity (Pascoe 2011). Gendered stereotypes are built into penal institutions, law, medicine, and the workplace, marking masculinity as rational and femininity as its opposite (Britton 1997; Henriksen 2017). Gender-based vulnerabilities and patterns of discrimination become both naturalized and stalwart in institutions. This calls for analyzing how women's lack of credibility in powerful institutions is mobilized in gaslighting dynamics.

In summary, gender stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional discrimination create unequal conditions in intimate relationships. The association of femininity with irrationality, alongside intersecting inequalities, is built into interpersonal relationships and social institutions, generating gender-based vulnerabilities to abuse. A sociological theory of gaslighting must therefore account for the following: gender-based stereotypes, intersecting forms of structural vulnerability, and institutional inequalities.

A Sociological Theory of Gaslighting

Psychological theories suggest that gaslighting takes place in an isolated dyad. In contrast, I propose that gaslighting draws from and exacerbates the gender-based power imbalances present in intimate relationships *and* in the larger social context. I expand on these two dimensions of gaslighting in what follows.

Part 1: Gaslighting is consequential when executed in unequal intimate relationships, creating an environment of "surreality."

Stern (2018) and others have found that gaslighting depends on some level of intimacy between perpetrator and victim. This is to be expected, because intimacy or an institutional relationship binds victim and perpetrator, such that she cannot simply dismiss his gaslighting efforts. Indeed, surveys indicate all forms of gender-based violence are more common when there is an intimate relationship between victim and perpetrator (WHO 2017). The IPV literature further shows that gaslighting creates an environment of "surreality" for victims. Joining these insights, a sociological theory of gaslighting must explain how surreality is created and maintained in power-laden intimate relationships. I distinguish gaslighting from other forms of psychological abuse by showing how it systematically constructs victims as "crazy" and irrational—particularly by relying on stereotypes about femininity.

> *Part 2:* Gaslighting is consequential when abusers mobilize gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims.

Gaslighting could not exist without inequities in the distribution of social, political, and economic power. The grooves of social inequality and cultural stereotyping provide footing for gaslighting strategies. Specifically, gaslighting is gendered due to the association of femininity with irrationality, which makes women more vulnerable to this form of abuse. The findings of this study reveal that the effects of gaslighting are more dramatic for women on the margins, who may experience increased institutional surveillance and lack of institutional credibility.

DATA AND METHODS

Gaslighting is a feature of power-laden intimate relationships, so I use domestic violence as a strategic case to develop a theory of gaslighting. Because of its invisibility, it would be difficult to conduct interviews about gaslighting without using a more identifiable phenomenon (i.e., domestic violence) as an access point. I investigated this phenomenon through 18 months of fieldwork, including archival research on feminist activism, in-depth interviews and participant observation with domestic violence professionals (N = 55), and life story interviews with survivors of domestic violence (N = 43). This article relies on the interviews with domestic violence survivors, although its themes are also informed by the professional interviews.

In the analysis, I marshal life story interviews to uncover the mechanisms and trace the processes (see Small 2009:22) via which gaslighting operates. My interview methodology is well-suited to the development of a rich, situated explanation of gaslighting because in-depth interviews help uncover the mechanisms buried in complex social phenomena. Life story interviews are especially useful for contextualizing gaslighting in the macro context of women's lives, as the details of life stories illuminate how large-scale forces shape and impinge on practices (Abu-Lughod 1991). Additionally, rather than imposing a framework, life story interviews allow for experiences to emerge on interviewees' own terms (Atkinson 2007; O'Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). This method thus helps expose forms of abuse that may be unnamable for victims themselves.

To conduct life story interviews with survivors of domestic violence, I met women in domestic violence support groups. I recruited women at four groups in Chicago and surrounding areas. All participating support groups were located in feminist-founded, nonprofit domestic violence organizations.[8] I had access to groups as a longtime volunteer and a state-certified domestic violence advocate myself. Support group leaders either handed out information about my research or asked me to attend their groups to describe my project. Members were eligible to participate if they had experienced domestic violence, identified as a woman, and were over 18 years old. An interpreter accompanied me to Spanish-speaking groups and interviews, otherwise I conducted interviews alone.

I interviewed 43 women for this study over a 12-month period; 12 women were interviewed two to four times. I interviewed 33 women in English and 10 in Spanish alongside an interpreter. Women chose the time and location of their interviews, which typically lasted between two and four hours and usually took place in women's homes or in a domestic violence agency. Because they attended support groups, all the women I interviewed were accustomed to talking about domestic violence. Nonetheless, I attempted to mitigate emotional risk by breaking the interview into two parts. First, I asked open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about yourself." During the second part of the interview, I asked a pre-arranged set of questions about women's experiences in institutions, about their own interpretations of violence, and about their experiences of "crazy-making." The gaslighting question was phrased in the following way: "Some women have told me that their partners called them 'crazy' or did things to make them feel 'crazy.' Did you experience that?" All but three of the 43 women I interviewed reported that their abusers called them "crazy." All 43 women described some degree of gaslighting, especially their abuser "flipping" stories or events to make them seem like "the crazy one."

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were stripped of names and other identifying information. Women were offered a small monetary incentive for participation, per Institutional Review Board guidelines. Of the 43 women who participated, all but two identified a male partner as their primary abuser.[9] Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of the women interviewed. Income is approximated by the way women described "getting by" at the time of the interview.[10] Despite the women's diverse backgrounds, all described "crazy-making." However, the specific ways abusers mobilized gender stereotypes and institutions depended on factors such as race and nationality.

I used coding and mapping techniques to analyze the data. Coding is the link between the data and the conceptual scheme and involves two stages: initial coding (discovery of concepts through intensive reading) and focused coding (synthesizing across themes) (Charmaz 1983). After multiple readings of the 1,825 single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews, I wrote a memo about each woman's life story. This memo-writing process allowed me to preserve the interview as a whole piece of data. Following memo-writing, I developed codes to connect across memos. This research aims to develop a conceptual explanation rather than generalize to a population; as such, memo-writing and coding are useful in this case-based causal analysis (Headworth 2019). Drawing the codes together, I then "mapped" connections using Clarke's (2005) "situated analysis." Clarke (2005:176) calls for developing situational "maps" to move toward a relational analysis that connects macro and micro elements, putting the "situation of all the data together." Following this approach, I drew a map of "micro" gaslighting tactics alongside larger forces in women's lives. I connected the elements of the map by drawing lines between them, organizing the map into analytic categories. Figure 1 presents the situational map for gaslighting.

While this figure is intended as a visualization of my coding schema rather than as a theoretical model, it is useful for understanding how gaslighting tactics rely on stereotypes (gendered, racialized, and sexual) *and* institutional settings. The diagram is hierarchical, such that the "tactics" are made possible as a result of stereotypes and the mobilization of those stereotypes in powerful institutional settings. "Stereotypes" and "institutional settings" operate as background contexts for the success of these gaslighting tactics in manipulating women's realities.

To ensure validity, I triangulated my schema with my other data sources and with extant literature. This schema syncs with my knowledge as a participant and researcher in the field, having spent many years as a hotline advocate, shelter volunteer, and participant observer. I also discussed findings with professionals in the field. Domestic violence

Table 1. Survivor Demographics, $N = 43$

	N	%		*N*	%
Race			**Immigrant Status**		
White	13	30%	U.S.-born	27	63%
Black/African American	11	26%	Documented immigrant	4	9%
Latina	17	40%	Undocumented (during abuse)	12	28%
Arab	1	2%			
South Asian	1	2%	**Duration of Relationship**		
			Less than 1 year	1	2%
Family Class Background			1 to 3 years	0	0%
Poor or working class	29	67%	4 to 6 years	4	9%
Middle class	14	33%	7 to 9 years	8	19%
			10+ years	16	37%
Primary Means of "Getting By"			Ongoing	4	9%
Paid work only (full- or part-time)	6	14%	N/A or unknown	3	7%
Child support	11	26%	Multiple of different length	7	16%
Disability or other combined public assistance	18	42%			
No income/family support	8	19%	**Housing Situation**		
			Rental	24	56%
Education			Owns home	7	16%
Less than high school	13	30%	Section 8 rental	4	9%
High school degree	11	26%	With family	6	14%
Some college or vocational	11	26%	Housing program	2	5%
College degree	8	19%			
			Mean age	41	
Number of Children					
0	6	14%			
1	6	14%			
2	13	30%			
3	12	28%			
4+	6	14%			
Has children under 6 years old	13	30%			

professionals talked to me regularly about the need for more research on gaslighting (interviews with Judy 7.9.15; Michelle 9.30.15; Caroline 12.8.15; Marie 3.16.16; Lucy 1.30.15). In general, professionals felt vexed by problems with identifying, prosecuting, and therapeutically responding to gaslighting. I attended two trainings for domestic violence therapists in which victims' experiences of confusion, micro-regulation, and unreality were major themes (field notes 12.16.15; 2.19–2.21.16). Both workshops focused on developing therapeutic techniques to help women overcome the sense of unreality that characterizes abusive relationships. I do not discuss my interviews with professionals in the present analysis, but these interviews provide a justificatory frame for the project, validating my contention that gaslighting is an independently significant feature of abuse.[11]

Because the women I interviewed were recruited from domestic violence organizations, they had all experienced intense forms of control and coercion in their relationships, which may have affected my results. However, my sample allows me to illuminate diverse structural contexts for gaslighting, its rootedness in gender stereotypes, and its controlling consequences. I am limited in my capacity to explicate mechanisms of gaslighting by differentiating *within* my sample, because all the women I interviewed

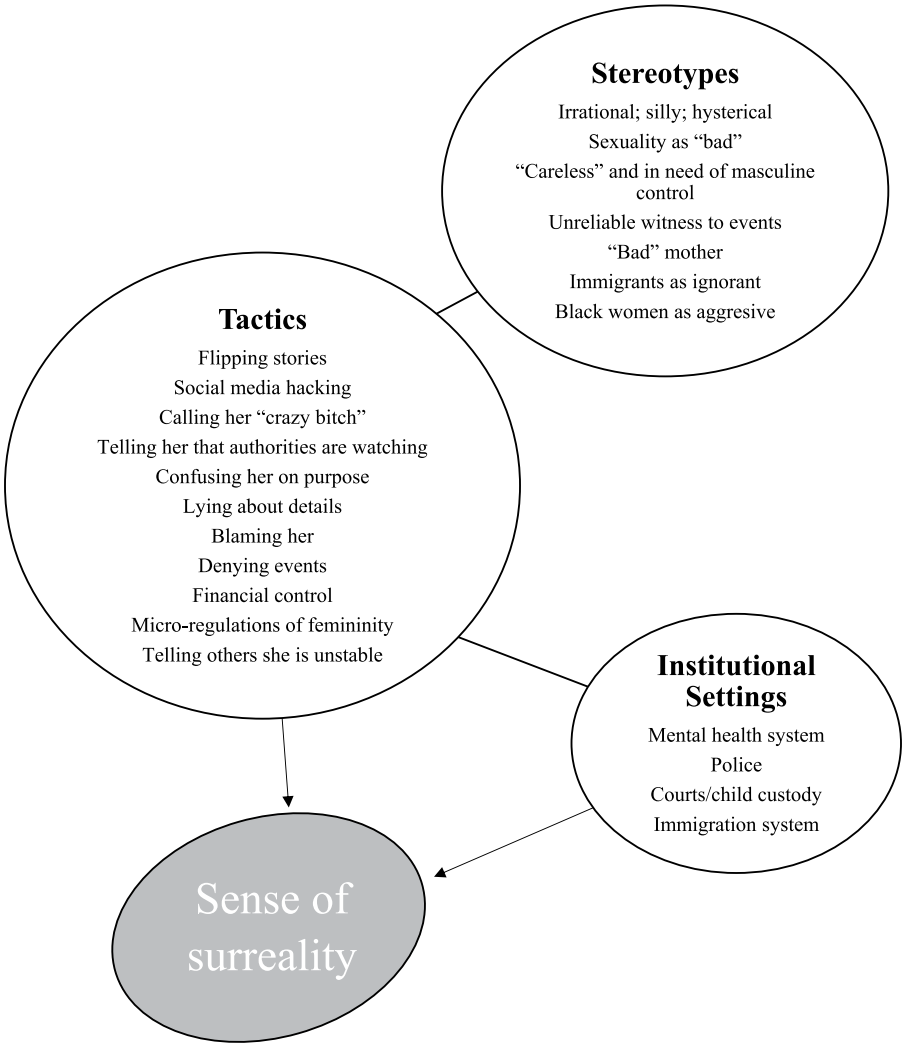

Figure 1. Situational Map of Gaslighting

described "crazy-making." Nonetheless, I show how women differ across institutional vulnerabilities: undocumented women experience gaslighting in the context of immigration, whereas black women's abusers are more likely to use gaslighting in the context of police and courts.[12]

"CRAZY BITCH": GENDER AND GASLIGHTING

Gaslighting tactics yoke together physical and verbal incidents of abuse into an overall sense of lost reality and confusion. These tactics are effective when mobilized as part of a larger pattern of gender-based power and control. Speaking to the overriding sense of surreality created in their relationships, the women in this study described their abusers "twisting" reality (Hope 2.4.16), "flipping the script" (Susan 10.6.16), creating a feeling of the "Twilight Zone" (Julie 2.16.16), "manipulating," "messing with," and "controlling" their minds (interviews with Alma 7.13.15; Kathy 3.1.16; L.L. 7.28.15), and "changing the facts" (Martha 3.1.16). Adriana described her relationship as "circles and circles" in which she did not know which way was up or down (interview

7.29.15). Across racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, women identified a hostile atmosphere of confusion and distortion. This atmosphere was gendered in the sense that "crazy" was associated with the epithet "bitch," with motherhood, and with women's bodies.

When I asked women about their partners' abusive tactics, they often described being called a "crazy bitch." This phrase came up so frequently, I began to think of it as the literal discourse of gaslighting. In gaslighting dynamics, the idea that women are saturated with emotion and incapable of reason is mobilized into a pattern of insults that chip away at women's realities. For example, Britney, a 30-year-old black woman, told me her abuser loved spinning the webs of a debate, especially when it left her feeling diminished. If she showed emotion during arguments, he called her "crazy"—incapable of providing a legitimate counter-argument. Any show of emotion from Britney was immediately pathologized and she was rendered overwrought, her husband the holder of "reason." This affected Britney's desire to stand up for herself as she began questioning her "mental state":

> *Britney:* God forbid I lose my cool—"She's crazy, she's crazy."
> *Author:* He would call you crazy?
> *Britney:* [nodding] "She's crazy, she's crazy." (interview 1.26.16)

These tactics culminated in a violent event in which Britney's abuser beat her and held her underwater in a bathtub, insisting all the while that he was simply trying to "calm her down."

This consistent construction of women as "crazy" ranged from private arguments to public campaigns. Simone referred to her abuser's sustained attempt to delegitimize her as "the crazy narrative" (interview 8.31.15). After she left him, he attacked her sanity relentlessly during divorce and child custody proceedings, even using old mental health records against her:

> *Simone:* He said all sorts of terrible things about me in the divorce papers . . . like I had orgies at the house, which isn't true. I am not that way at all. [long pause]
> *Author:* He was trying to discredit you?
> *Simone:* Yeah. Like, that I'm absolutely crazy and I can't be around the kids. It was terrible. [He would say] that adulterous women run in my family. . . . He would say, "Be a mother." Because he would always be saying that I'm not a good enough mother. (interview 8.31.15)

Simone's ex-husband hacked into her social media accounts during the divorce and created public posts that made her appear unstable. He also accessed her bank accounts and moved money around randomly, intentionally using tactics that evaded police attention. He then cited these examples to friends and family, insisting she could not be trusted with the children. His covert efforts left her feeling she could not identify what was real anymore. Simone's abuser embedded his attacks on her sanity in attacks on her sexuality and motherhood, claiming she had "orgies" and was not fit to be a mother. Simone had recently come out as bisexual, suggesting that he sought to mobilize a stigmatized sexual identity against her to make her seem unstable. These gaslighting strategies played on Simone's existing social vulnerabilities: her supposed failings as a mother and deviant sexuality became her abuser's weapons to make her seem "crazy."

Women often described how their abusers associated their actions and statements with the idea that women are "crazy," "careless," and emotionally unregulated. Ebony's partner would steal her money and then tell her she was "careless" about finances and had lost it herself (interview 7.6.15). Adriana's boyfriend hid her phone and then told her she had lost it, in a dual effort to confuse her and prevent her from communicating with others (interview 7.29.15). Jenn described her ex-boyfriend as a "chameleon" who made up small stories to confuse her, like lying about what color shirt he had worn the day before to make her feel disoriented (interview 2.18.16). Luz told me, "He was so astute. When things happened, he would turn it around and make it seem like something else was going on" (interview 9.10.15). When Jaylene's boyfriend pushed her, he also yelled at her, saying, "Look what you made me do . . . you're

crazy" (interview 7.27.15). Emily described her ex-husband stealing her keys so she could not leave the house and then insisting she had lost them "again" (interview 10.26.15).

As these examples indicate, men's efforts to make women feel "crazy" involved small strategies of control and confusion. Each example deals with the theme of irrationality, and all were used by male partners in conjunction with the "crazy" label, often alongside the term "bitch." Men used masculinity—which gave them access to "rationality"—to associate their partners with lack of reason, a feminine quality. As Emily explained, the result is that "you go to actually believing that you're ugly, worthless, you ain't going to do nothing but have a bunch of babies" (interview 10.26.15). For Emily, the effects of gaslighting were gendered and racialized: her fear of losing respectability as a black woman—being worthless for having "a bunch of babies"—was exacerbated by her abuser's attempts to make her seem careless (i.e., hiding her keys and making her late to work).

As Emily's quotation shows, women experienced gendered accusations of insanity in the context of related vulnerabilities also being mobilized against them, especially around motherhood. Nevaeh's abuser testified in court that she was "unstable" and "depressed," using diagnostic language to label her an unfit mother. Her abuser's accusations that she was "crazy" followed her through years of child custody proceedings (interview 2.26.16). Like Simone's abuser, Nevaeh's partner used assumptions of excessively feminine emotionality—he cited examples of Nevaeh crying—in an effort to undermine her credibility as a mother: "He denied everything [about the violence] and made it seem like I . . . created these thoughts in my head" (interview 7.6.15). Nevaeh described feeling so exhausted by his manipulations that she eventually came to ask herself if she was in fact "crazy."

Embodiment was also key to abusers' use of gender-based stereotypes to make women feel "crazy." When Carla was pregnant, her boyfriend told her she was "crazy" and "ridiculous" for having morning sickness, insisting that her symptoms were not real, she was inventing them for attention, and she would never be a good mother (interview 12.14.15). Carla's abuser cast her body as out of control, suggesting an excessive and disreputable femininity. Luisa's abuser also cast her body as pathologically feminine. He forced her to take his anti-depressant pills, insisting she needed them because of "women's issues": "He used to give me small pills. He was saying because I have menstruation. He was blaming it on me, every time I wanted to end the relationship, he was saying it's because I have [an imbalance] in my hormones" (interview 8.26.15). Luisa's boyfriend relied on the idea that women are inherently unstable to perpetuate her dependence on him and undermine her reality. In this way, gaslighting tactics draw on the association of femininity with irrationality specifically via motherhood and embodiment.

The women I interviewed learned to take extreme measures to avoid gaslighting, demonstrating that this form of abuse may put women at elevated risk of physical violence. Susan, a 32-year-old black woman, explained: "You feel like it's actually witches out here. It will get to the point that you feel like that. Like, did this person hypnotize me or drug me? . . . I had a self before I got with him. . . . I made more decisions and I knew myself. [It] got to the point that I wanted him to hit me, to get it over with. . . . Cause the worst part was messing with my head" (interview 10.22.15). Several women I interviewed explained that they preferred physical to psychological abuse, and they would sometimes provoke physical violence to avoid "crazy-making" (Maria S. 7.28.15; Luz 9.10.15). Maria S. believed physical violence would validate that her experiences were genuinely abusive: "[Physical abuse] would be more compatible with reality" (interview 7.28.15).

This evidence shows that gaslighting is linked to insidious patterns of control, in which women are denied mobility, access to their social networks, and institutional help. For example, Susan described her ex's

gaslighting tactics in terms of "flipping the script," meaning he would transform stories and events to make it seem like she was the aggressor. These strategies were effective when used alongside a range of other tactics: he told the children she was "crazy," followed Susan when she left the house, monitored her phone calls and text messages, and called her friends to check up on her. He would then insist *she* had jealousy problems. Susan suggested that gaslighting causes one's sense of reality to become haunted by inexplicable distortions. She told me several times that "domestic violence comes with a lot of confusion" (interview 10.6.15). She slowly came to believe his manipulations as he cut her off from loved ones. He even took scissors to her home phone lines so she could not call the police. Gaslighting was part of an overall coercive and controlling context for Susan—it was effective because it cast her as noncredible and unstable, leaving her isolated and disoriented. Susan's abuser relied on stereotypes about women as excessively emotional—crazed about love—to execute this control.

By drawing from and reinforcing the association of femininity with emotionality and irrationality, abusers' gaslighting tactics make motherhood, embodiment, and reason itself into sites of confusion. These tactics often plunge women into a sense of lost reality, worsening their entrapment and isolation. The feeling of "twilight zone" created in these relationships depends on the effective mobilization of gendered stereotypes in an unequal intimate context.

SEXUALITY AND GASLIGHTING

Gaslighting efforts are further embedded in the gendered (and racialized) social organization of sexuality. For the women I interviewed, attacks on sexual respectability were a regular part of intimate abuse, rooted in the association of female sexuality with deviousness, danger, and threat. These attacks became part of gaslighting, establishing a hostile environment of surreality. For example, Rosa, a 41-year-old Latina woman, described how her ex-husband would invent tales of her infidelities and try to convince her they were true:

> He'd make things up that didn't happen. Sometimes he'd tell me things like, "A cousin saw you at X place and that you were with someone." Things like that. I'd get upset and tell him, "Bring him. Bring him to my face and we'll see if it's true. I didn't do anything and wasn't at such place." But he'd make things up. . . . He'd say that I was crazy and all that. . . . I told him that I wasn't crazy, that he was the crazy one. Obviously, he would start everything and then make me feel [like I started it]. . . . Sometimes I did feel confused. (interview 2.12.16)

Rosa's ex-husband tried to convince her she was cheating on him, a constant accusation that obsessed him. He used these stories to justify following Rosa when she left the house and beating her physically when she came home. Rosa regularly had to defend herself against his version of events, which was also a defense of her own sexual respectability.

The women I interviewed often had to defend their sexual reputations against their abusers' outrageous accusations. Cultural ideas about women's dangerous, unruly sexuality—especially stereotypes surrounding black and Latina women's "bad girl" sexuality (Garcia 2012)—underlie attempts to unmake their realities. Jaylene, a 23-year-old Latina woman, explained that her partner constantly calls her a "ho" and insists she needs psychiatric help. He pressures her to drink alcohol and then calls her names (e.g., "slut") when he thinks she has drunk too much (interview 7.27.15). Jaylene's boyfriend embeds his accusations that she is "crazy" in attacks on her sexuality and in attempts to make her seem out of control by forcing alcohol on her. He invents stories about her continued interest in ex-boyfriends, stories against which Jaylene is forced to defend herself to avoid violence. Throughout our interview, Jaylene insisted, "I'm not the crazy one" (interview 7.27.15).

Fabiola explained the relationship between sexuality, "crazy"-making, and gender very clearly: "Every man has a different way to make the girl feel like she's crazy or she's the bad one" (interview 7.24.15). Being a "bad" sexual subject and being "crazy" are closely linked in the power dynamics Fabiola laid out. Assumptions about women's dangerous sexuality undergird abusers' attempts to construct their victims as unstable. For example, Fabiola's partner regularly called her "nasty" and "sick" after they had sex. He accused her of not loving him if she did not sleep with him, and when she did, he denigrated her sexuality. This created a situation in which Fabiola—who described herself as a proudly "sexual person"—could not rely on her sexual identity to ground her reality, because it was constantly used as a weapon against her.

Fabiola's sense that she was "bad" was amplified by the fact that she had immigrated to the United States to be with her boyfriend: "He said, 'You are crazy. No one loves you. You are here with me. You don't have anyone else here'" (interview 7.10.15). Because Fabiola was isolated from others who could have offered her a different narrative about the relationship, her boyfriend's attempts to undermine her sanity and sexual identity were more effective. When Fabiola tried to leave her boyfriend, he threatened to "prove" she was crazy in court so she would lose custody of their daughter and face deportation. Similarly, Maria S.'s ex-husband asked for sex and then told her she was too sexually forward, that she did not know how to behave properly as a wife "in this country" (interview 7.28.15). Maria S.'s partner constructed her as a sexual deviant and cultural outsider simultaneously, attempting to make her feel sexually and culturally disoriented. These tactics were possible because of Maria S.'s gender-based vulnerability to stereotypes about her sexuality and nationality.

Structural vulnerabilities—gender, nationality, sexuality—create the terrain upon which gaslighting tactics become successful. The invisibility of this form of abuse amplifies those tactics. Adriana, a 22-year-old Latina woman, struggled to define her experiences as "violence" because her boyfriend used invisible strategies such as pathologizing her sexuality, making up stories about her infidelities, and following her. Adriana's boyfriend instructed his friends to keep an eye on Adriana while she was at school, and he would later accuse her of sneaking away with other men whenever his friends lost sight of her. He peppered her with questions each night on the phone about who she had been with, keeping her awake so she was too exhausted to leave for school in the morning. She was expected to call him as soon as she woke up to ensure she was still at home and to get approval of her clothing. Despite this surveillance, he insisted Adriana had been sleeping around. Adriana's abuser linked accusations of infidelity directly to accusations that her memory was untrustworthy and to tactics that kept her exhausted and disoriented.

Abusers frequently defined women's sexuality as reckless, devious, and in need of masculine control. Mariposa, a 46-year-old Latina woman, told me her partner convinced himself that he "saw" her have sex with other men at her job, even though he had never been to her workplace (interview 7.7.15). Margaret's husband convinced her she was attracting too much attention by dressing up, doing her hair, and wearing make-up (interview 7.24.15). She began to believe his stories about men leering at her, so she started wearing sweatshirts and overeating—in her words, she stopped "taking care" of herself to appease his suspicions. Carla's husband also preferred it if she "looked messy" when he came home from work, otherwise, "he started telling me that . . . I'd surely been prostituting" (interview 12.14.15). Carla's husband tried to convince her she was sleeping with men in the neighborhood, pointing to men on the street, asking her to identify which ones were waiting for her. He called her a "prostitute" for having an IUD (intrauterine device, a form of birth control) and forced her to have it removed. His sexual gaslighting strategies inhibited Carla's mobility—she began to stay home all the time, refusing to go out because she feared the stories he might invent.

Gaslighting tactics force women to shut down sexual expression, to hide themselves in the home, away from their preferred performances of femininity. In part, making up stories of infidelity is about chipping away at women's sense of reality via attacks on their sexual identities, keeping them trapped in the exhausting cycle of refuting the abuser's constructed reality. Sexual gaslighting is key to understanding how gender sets the foundations for and consequences of gaslighting: because women's sexuality is already a site of vulnerability—subject to gender-based stereotyping—it easily becomes a feature of gaslighting. In the examples provided here, being a cultural "outsider" amplified the harm of these tactics. Gaslighting works by mobilizing stereotypes of female sexuality into assaults on women's realities, creating a surreal environment that limits their autonomy and mobility.

INSTITUTIONAL VULNERABILITIES AND GASLIGHTING

Gaslighting strategies that draw on women's institutional vulnerabilities are especially effective at keeping women isolated and entrapped: abusers manipulate women's fear of and lack of credibility in institutions to make them seem "crazy" and to control them further. These institutional vulnerabilities depend on gender, sexual, and racial inequalities, which are built into the way women are "read" and treated in institutional settings. Institutions widely perceived as "helpful" for victims therefore often become a feature of gaslighting, because abusers use women's fear and lack of credibility against them in such settings. I focus on immigration, police/courts, and mental health systems because these were the institutions women most frequently identified as exacerbating gaslighting. For undocumented women, abusers used threats and made-up stories about the immigration system to amplify surreality and insecurity; black women were more likely to experience gaslighting in the context of police and courts, where they experienced diminished credibility and stereotypes of aggressiveness; and for women who needed or used mental health services, abusers mobilized the stigma of mental health to make them seem like "the crazy one."

Immigration System

Maria L., who is undocumented, lived in constant fear that if she left her abuser, he would turn her over to immigration authorities. He tied these threats to her supposed mental instability: "[He said] that he was going to take me to a mental institution, that I was crazy. He made me feel like I wasn't a person" (interview 12.9.15). Abusers commonly use threats of deportation against undocumented women (Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Raj and Silverman 2002; Villalón 2010), but in Maria L.'s case those threats were linked to attempts to undermine her sanity. Maria's abuser kept her in a state of insecurity by making her feel she was "insane" and that immigration authorities would deport her because of it. Undocumented women experienced gaslighting in the context of the immigration system: their abusers made up stories about them being surveilled and tracked, yet their abusers were the ones actually executing this type of surveillance. As a result, these women felt insecure and "watched," causing them to question their own sanity and curtailing their efforts to leave.

Abusers' use of the immigration system is connected to sexuality, since undocumented women are often reliant on sexual relationships to secure or retain legal status. This sense of displacement and helplessness amplifies surreality. Fabiola's abuser told her that no one else would want her because she was "just a Mexican" (interview 7.24.15). He used this "insult" to insist that no one would believe her about the abuse, and he said he was *allowed* to treat her this way because he was a U.S. citizen. Liz's husband insisted no one would want her because she was undocumented (interview 12.4.15), and he convinced her he had cancer so she would stay with him, inventing doctors' appointments and faking

illness from chemotherapy. Because Liz was afraid of being tracked via the healthcare system, she was too isolated to figure out his lies. For both women, these were not just insults, but attempts to make them feel displaced: their abusers sought to normalize their abuse and manipulations by constructing Fabiola and Liz as outsiders. Maria L., Liz, and Fabiola were already in precarious legal situations, so their abusers' "crazy-making" tactics took on the flavor of their vulnerabilities in the immigration system. All were dependent on sexual relationships to remain in the country, trapping them at the intersection of gaslighting and legal precarity.

Made-up stories about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) patrols also appeared regularly in interviews with undocumented women. Delma's husband invented stories about immigration authorities looking for her in the neighborhood. She therefore "closed" herself in the house because she was exhausted by his attempts to disorient her (interview 2.26.16). When Rubi tried to flee to another state with her children, her husband told her he had sent ICE after her (interview 3.2.16). She was forced to return. Her husband also insisted she was a witch who had hired a shaman to keep him trapped in their marriage, although it was *he* who was following her and keeping her trapped in the home (interview 3.2.16). Rubi's husband used the threat of ICE to keep her under his control, and he "flipped" reality—using tales of the feminine supernatural—to insist she was the one who would not let go of the relationship.

The immigration system becomes a feature of gaslighting when abusers use women's precarious legal status to amplify surreality, making women feel insecure and surveilled. Accusations that women are "crazy" are more dangerous for undocumented women, who have reasons to fear the immigration system. Undocumented women were genuinely fearful of immigration authorities, fear that their abusers mobilized against them to make them feel "watched." The threat of surveillance and deportation thereby sharpened the blade of "crazy-making" efforts.

Police and Courts

Susan described an incident when she called the police after her boyfriend assaulted her: "The police talked to me. Then [my boyfriend said to me], 'You know I wasn't doing that, you know that. Did you hear me? Are you blanking out? What's wrong?' [speaks in a fake concerned voice] He'd make eye motions with me, like, are you going crazy?" (interview 10.22.15). As Susan tried to tell the police what happened, her abuser interceded to make it seem as if she were making up the story, as if she were having delusions and was too unstable to understand what had happened. Susan's credibility with the police was already in jeopardy because she had called them so many times: "It got to the point where the police didn't believe me because I kept going back. Like, 15th time it happened and they was called, they were like . . . you're the problem" (interview 10.22.15). Susan's abuser used this lack of credibility and police abandonment against her, exacerbating her isolation.

Susan's abuser manipulated event narratives, accused her of being a "crazy bitch," and mobilized police mistrust of her to unravel her social context. I found that abusers used the refrain of "crazy bitch" alongside manipulations of institutional authority to assert that women are unreliable witnesses to their own experiences. This insistence that women cannot offer credible testimony is part of the gendered core of gaslighting and is rooted in the association of femininity with irrationality. Women described feeling that court officials and police were more likely to believe men's stories because their abusers were skilled at "telling a good story" (Gwyn 11.3.15). Gender intersects with race and class here, such that Susan's social positioning as a poor, black woman made her exceptionally unreliable to police, amplifying her lack of credibility. Susan's abuser leveraged institutional mistrust of her to rob her of authorities who would corroborate her story and protect her from future violence.

Rosalyn's abuser also undermined her in front of police, relying on stereotypes about

black women as aggressive. Rosalyn described an altercation on a busy street that led to police involvement: "By the time I . . . can [stand] up, the police are on top of me, talking about, 'Stop before we tase you.' . . . [My ex] was very charming. . . . He's like, 'You know she crazy. That's my baby momma. . . . She just mad cause we can't get back together'" (interview 2.12.16). Rosalyn's abuser convinced police that *she* was the aggressor and they arrested her. After the arrest, Rosalyn was forced to flee to a domestic violence shelter in the suburbs.

These tactics mirrored other gaslighting strategies Rosalyn's abuser used: he told friends and family on social media that she was "crazy" and invented stories that she was following him. Rosalyn began to believe his version of events because he was so outspoken about the idea that she had lost her mind and was desperately trying to get him back (interview 2.12.16). Rosalyn's abuser damaged her institutional credibility, denying her a rightful victim status, while also denying her empathy from friends and family. He marked Rosalyn as a desperate, crazed woman, relying on the association of women's sexuality with irrationality. These stereotypes were especially effective when Rosalyn's abuser mobilized them in front of police.

Tina, also a black woman in her 30s, provides another example of the connection between gaslighting and powerful institutions. She explained what happened when she and her ex were arguing at the courthouse while the child representative—an official responsible for mediating their custody arrangement—looked on:

> I was always being called crazy. Even when [the child representative] had me cornered in the hallway with him, and my kids' father says, "I never punched you, though." He says that. "I never blacked your eye. I never punched you." And I looked at the child rep, and I was like, "He feels like since he never punched me in the eye or busted my lip that it wasn't abuse." . . . And for [the child representative] to not respond to that, I was baffled. (interview 9.14.15)

Tina's ex pulled hair out of her scalp, slammed her against walls, strangled her, and broke her furniture, but he believed he was "nonviolent" because Tina never had a black eye. The abuse was so severe that he had been prosecuted multiple times on felony charges. Still, he insisted Tina was "crazy" and exaggerating. He manipulated the child representative into endorsing his version of events, jeopardizing Tina's custody of their children. Tina's abuser relied on the stereotype that women are prone to exaggeration to undermine her status as victim, making her seem "crazy" in a powerful institutional setting.

As Susan's, Tina's, and Rosalyn's experiences indicate, systems such as police and courts are central to gaslighting, especially for black women. The legal system becomes a critical site of gaslighting when abusers gain control of the narrative and "flip" stories and events, drawing on stereotypes about women as irrational, and especially about black women as aggressive. In this way, institutional authorities sometimes become unknowing colluders in gaslighting tactics, setting women up for further violence and loss of credibility.

Mental Health System

The mental health system is a key site of vulnerability because abusive partners regularly interfere in healthcare decision-making (McCloskey et al. 2007). The women I interviewed frequently discussed the role of the mental health system in exacerbating gaslighting. Women reported being both barred from and forced to use mental health services—in both cases, these tactics cast women as "crazy," mobilizing the stigma of mental health use against them.

Women have solid reasons for fearing their abusers' constructions of them as "crazy," fears that typically involve losing custody of their children or losing credibility in social networks. Margaret described her first husband's threats to take their children away

from her if she saw a therapist: "Right after I had [my son], I felt worthless. . . . I thought I should just go away and he should get a better mom. So that's when I started talking to [my husband] about it, and he said, 'You go [to a therapist] and I'll prove you're nuts. Go ahead'" (interview 7.24.15). Margaret's husband prevented her from getting help for what she now refers to as postpartum depression, using the stigma of mental health to keep her trapped and isolated from resources.

Luisa experienced a different form of gaslighting through the mental health system when her abuser forced her to see *his* psychiatrist. He performed this manipulation easily because, as a new immigrant, she was intimidated by the mental health system and believed he had the power to institutionalize her. Luisa's abuser also drugged her with antipsychotic medication to force her into harmful sexual acts. Afterward, when Luisa told him she was going to leave, he threatened to bring her underwear to her boss to reveal what a "whore" she was (interview 8.26.15). Luisa felt she was the problem because she was an immigrant and did not understand the ways of relationships in the United States. Luisa's abuser combined "crazy-making" strategies rooted in lies about the mental health system with attacks on her sexuality and nationality (calling her a "fucking immigrant").

Luisa's experiences of gaslighting were exacerbated by her abuser's manipulation of her memory of events. In one early episode, he pressured her into drinking alcohol, then provoked her into an argument and claimed she "went crazy" and physically assaulted him. Luisa did not remember acting violently. Still, he used this alleged incident against Luisa any time she threatened to leave, telling her he would expose her as "the real abuser" in the relationship: *she* was out of control, unreasonable, an alcoholic, and physically abusive. As Ferraro (2006) notes, men's attempts to cast women as the "real" abusers are central to establishing surreality. Luisa experienced at least two forms of mental health system-related gaslighting. First, her abuser forced her to go to a psychiatrist against her will, insisting she needed professional help and that he could institutionalize her, using gender-based stereotypes and immigration-related isolation against her. Second, he tried to convince her she was "crazy" by making up stories that cast her as the primary abuser in the relationship, making her fearful of seeking outside help.

Independent use of mental health services can also provide fodder for gaslighting strategies. Three of the women I interviewed were institutionalized as an indirect result of domestic violence, and all of them felt this experience worsened their abusers' gaslighting tactics upon release. Adriana explained, "When I got out of the hospital, he was like, 'I fucking told you that you were insane! What type of person gets locked up in a hospital? How crazy are you!'" (interview 7.29.15). Adriana's boyfriend used the hospitalization to mark her as psychologically defective, eroding her autonomy. He used the mental health system as leverage to construct her as the *really* "crazy" one, heightening her feelings of blame for the environment of surreality in which she lived. Because women already feel vulnerable and lack autonomy when accessing residential mental health services (Warshaw and Tinnon 2018), this experience can become a site of further coercion in gaslighting tactics.

As these accounts show, mental health and legal systems are sites where the harms of gaslighting may be exacerbated. Inventing stories about infidelities, insisting that women are "crazy" and overly emotional, and manipulating memories are more damaging when executed in institutions where women already experience fear, diminished autonomy, and lack of credibility. In this way, gaslighting exploits conditions of institutional discrimination or, in the case of mental health, stigma related to use. Institutions are transformed into sites of harm when abusers mobilize women's fear of and lack of credibility in these powerful settings to make them seem "crazy." In this way, institutions become part of the gaslighting routine, isolating victims from support and contributing to surreality.

EXTENDING THE CASE

My goal is not simply to reveal gaslighting as a mechanism of control in abusive relationships, but to use the case of domestic violence to build a theoretical framework for gaslighting that can be translated into other contexts. The theory offered here posits that gaslighting is rooted in power-laden intimate relationships, creates a sense of surreality, and mobilizes gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims. This theory specifies how abstract social inequalities can be transformed into interpersonal weapons. How could this theoretical framework be applied to situations outside the context of domestic violence?

We could imagine an otherwise analytically confusing situation between an academic mentor, a white man in his 50s, and a graduate student, a working-class man of color in his 20s. The mentor does not use physical or sexual violence, but regularly asks the student for academic labor and then denies him public credit, asks him to share scholarly ideas and then tries to convince the student the ideas are the mentor's own, and insists the student will not succeed without him. When the student complains, the mentor tells him he is an overly sensitive millennial who does not understand academia. The mentor also informs his colleagues that the student may require a mental health leave of absence. The student is left feeling confused about his own ideas and about the boundaries of intellectual sharing. He feels isolated from potential allies, fearing that rumors about his mental health may hurt his career. Nothing particularly documentable has occurred, but the student feels isolated, confused, and diminished—powerless and controlled in an important relationship. A context of unreality has been created for him, in a power-laden intimate relationship, that exploits his institutional vulnerabilities. Like many abusers in this study, the mentor likely has no conscious intention of "gaslighting" the student.

Using the theoretical framework outlined in this article, we can better understand this situation. The relationship is power-unequal and takes place in a steeply hierarchical setting. The student's career status is a clear vulnerability, used to establish power and discredit the student's complaints. Unlike in cases of domestic violence, the hierarchical institutional setting in a mentor–mentee relationship is likely more salient than is gender. Still, the gender of the mentor matters, and he associates the student with feminized irrationality: the mentor is the holder of (masculine) reason, and the student is constructed as unreasonable and unknowledgeable. The mentor accuses the student of irrationality and lack of know-how, *feminizing* and discrediting him. The student is labeled "overly sensitive" because of age and ignorant of academia, potentially because of race and class. The student experiences "surreality" because this takes place in a power relationship and *maybe this is just how mentor relationships are supposed to work*. Finally, these gaslighting strategies become public when the mentor constructs the student as "crazy" to colleagues.

Using the theoretical framework outlined here, we can avoid calling this just a "bad" interpersonal situation. Instead, we can analyze how gaslighting dynamics are made possible and effective due to gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities. The context of a hierarchical institutional setting is especially critical in this case. Gender is still relevant to the construction of rationality here, although less so as an individual-level variable. Overall, gaslighting mobilizes and worsens the power inequalities already present in the relationship *and* in the institutional setting.

CONCLUSIONS

Gaslighting is at risk of being extracted from its social conditions of possibility, as well as its consequences, if it remains under-theorized by sociologists. Building a sociological theory of gaslighting, I have shown that micro tactics of abuse are situated in macro conditions of inequality. The main argument is that gaslighting operates via the exploitation of social vulnerabilities in unequal intimate

relationships. This research contributes to the IPV literature by parsing mechanisms of gaslighting and their socio-structural correlates as part of coercive control. I identify key social mechanisms via which gaslighting tactics create "surreality"; these include associating victims' thoughts, speech, and actions with feminized irrationality, exploiting intersecting inequalities related to race and nationality, and using victims' lack of institutional credibility against them.

Because gaslighting is gendered, I expect it to be more common with male perpetrators and female victims; however, gaslighting can also work more generally by feminizing victims, as demonstrated in the mentor–mentee thought experiment. Systematically associating another person with irrationality in a power relationship is a *gender-based* strategy that reinforces power dynamics. This article shows how men's relative cultural and economic capital, combined with their access to "rationality" and institutional credibility, set the conditions for gaslighting. For victims with intersecting social marginalities related to race, ability, and legal status, these dynamics are especially dangerous.

Gaslighting warrants general consideration because it illuminates under-theorized forms of social power. My goal is to understand how gender inequalities translate into the "surreal" strategies of interpersonal harm that have so captured public attention. Extending this goal, we can see that attempts to undermine women's realities should be understood as constitutive of gender as a system. The case of gaslighting reveals the centrality of the cultural association of femininity with irrationality in perpetuating gender inequality, especially in intimate relationships. Gender scholars should consider how this pervasive stereotype operates in gender-based social processes more generally, shaping women's ability to testify to their own social realities and to control the course of social interactions. Whether gender is theorized as a practice (West and Zimmerman 1987), an institution (Martin 2004), a structure (Connell 1987; Risman 2004), or a set of relations that operate through binary oppositions (Connell 1995; Schippers 2007), the gendered construction of rationality is key to how power is distributed in the social world. Race and sexuality also matter, suggesting these associations are intersectional. Denying women's realities and stripping them of credibility is a long-standing feature of gender systems that operates with force in intimate relationships. By theorizing gaslighting as part of inequality in this way, it becomes clearer how current political strategies may successfully draw from gaslighting strategies.

Still, analyses that suggest Trump is gaslighting America go too far. The framework offered in this article argues that gaslighting occurs in power-laden *intimate* relationships, precisely because trust and coercive interpersonal strategies bind the victim to the perpetrator. The public has too much collective power to experience gaslighting, such that we can fact-check and push counter-narratives into the public sphere. Still, it is unsurprising that Trump and other leaders draw from gaslighting strategies, as they are rooted in masculine power and control. Positing gaslighting as a political strategy captures something important: manipulating others' sense of reality amplifies power; associating others with feminized unreasonableness is useful for domination.[13] Thus, political analysts would do well to consider how and why *feminizing* one's opponents is effective for political domination, thereby highlighting the ways political discourses are fundamentally gendered.

Finally, this research has policy implications related to domestic violence, such that public discourse and policies should extend abuse prevention, education, and awareness to gaslighting. Popular conceptualizations of intimate abuse should go well beyond physical, verbal, and financial abuse. Women's stories of gaslighting suggest the invisibility of this form of abuse makes it especially damaging, cutting victims off from institutional protections. Furthermore, attempts to address psychological abuse presume that mental health and legal systems are "safe" for victims. This research shows that institutions, on the contrary, are sometimes a feature of the abuse. Finally, the social embeddedness of

gaslighting reveals that attempts to address IPV will not be effective without consideration of macro vulnerabilities. Policies to protect against gaslighting should therefore focus on increasing women's institutional credibility and cultural and economic capital.

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Notes

1. Originally adapted from a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton.
2. Their study follows the plot of the film *Gaslight*: Charles Boyer's character aims to drive Ingrid Bergman's character to the point of involuntary institutionalization so he can steal her fortune.
3. The IPV literature is riven with long-standing debates on how best to measure violence and whether domestic violence is a gendered phenomenon. Johnson's typology (1995, 2006, 2008) seeks to address both impasses by arguing that embattled researchers are just studying distinct phenomena. Thus, "intimate terrorism" refers to domestic violence as a pattern of power and control (the feminist model), whereas "situational couple violence" refers to the gender-equal phenomenon of couples fighting, without control or domination. Intimate terrorism is reflected in clinical and criminal samples, whereas situational couple violence is found in "family conflict" surveys (Johnson 2008; Kimmel 2002).
4. According to Johnson (1995, 2006, 2008), the most severe type of abuse found between partners is "intimate terrorism": one partner (typically male) exercises dominance and control over the other partner (typically female). Similarly, Stark (2007) uses the term "coercive control" to refer to patterns of gender-based oppression in abusive relationships.
5. The gendered nature of intimate terrorism is captured well in the Power and Control Wheel, a visual representation of the feminist model of domestic violence developed by Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar as part of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota in the mid-1980s. See https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/ for more information on the wheel and its adaptations.
6. Many studies find that the most injurious forms of violence are executed by men against women, but men still experience abuse. In same-sex relationships, men report significant rates of victimization and power imbalances worsened by issues like poverty, although these dynamics are under-studied (Stark and Hester 2019). Other research shows that male victims of IPV experience significant distress and emotional problems, but they are less likely to be fearful of female partners and to uproot their lives in response (Hester et al. 2017; Myhill 2017; Ross 2012). Men also report shame and embarrassment when they report IPV, as well as lack of services (Tsui, Cheung, and Leung 2010).
7. Survey results suggest that women are assaulted, raped, and stalked by intimate partners at a rate of at least 1 in 4 or 1 in 5 (Black et al. 2011). Black and Native women face higher rates of intimate partner violence than the national average (Lacey et al. 2016). See Garcia-Moreno and colleagues (2006) for global statistics. See Brush (2011) for a macro-level class-based analysis. See Purvin (2007) and Scott, London, and Myers (2002) for how domestic violence affects women's economic autonomy. Finally, precarious legal status puts immigrant women at greater risk of violence and isolates them from institutions (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Raj and Silverman 2002; Villalón 2010).
8. Although recruiting women from domestic violence support groups does not provide a representative sample of domestic violence victims *in general*—individuals who do not seek formal help remain a practically inaccessible group for qualitative interviewing—evidence suggests that recruiting from support groups provides a relatively accurate view of heterosexual women victims who voluntarily or involuntarily seek formal help for "coercive control" types of domestic violence (Johnson 2006; Raj and Silverman 2007; Stark 2007).
9. One participant identified her primary abuser as her father and another identified her brother.
10. Socioeconomic status can be difficult to assess for domestic violence victims because many women fall into low-income status when they leave male partners, or their partners interfere with their labor force participation (Brush 2011). Of the women I interviewed, 29 subsisted primarily on child support and public assistance. Many of the other women relied on cobbled-together resources from family and nonprofit agencies. Because domestic violence agencies offer free services and emergency shelter, most of the women who access these agencies are low-income or experiencing homelessness (Bell 2003; Davis 2006; Tolman and Rosen 2001).

11. More information about these additional data sources and about emergent research on gaslighting is available upon request.
12. This is a limited sample, so additional studies will be needed to apply this theory to the experiences of other racial groups, LGBTQ+ victims, and victims who do not seek formal help.
13. The framework outlined here also opens avenues for theoretical work on the links between white nationalism and misogyny (see Beinart 2019).

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