

A painting depicting a professional meeting. A man in a dark suit and glasses stands at the front, pointing at a flipchart with a red line graph and yellow bars. Several other people are seated around a table, looking towards him. The scene is set in an office with large windows in the background.

It's Not Always Wrong to Gaslight Employees

Daniel J. Singer
singerd@phil.upenn.edu





What is Gaslighting?



Gaslight (1940 Film):

- Gregory dims gaslights
- Tells Paula she's imagining it
- Causes Paula to doubt her sanity / perception

What the Literature on Gaslighting Says ...

Disagreements on whether gaslighting is ...

- essentially **epistemic** (e.g. Spear 2018) or emotional (e.g., Abramson 2014)
- **intentional** (e.g. Kirk-Giannini 2022)
- **structural** or if it only occurs one-on-one (e.g. Stark 2019, Berenstain 2020)
- intentional **manipulation** of trust (Abramson 2024)
- a kind of **testimonial injustice** (Ivy 2017)
- **disjunctive** in nature so that it depends on the victim's membership in an oppressed group (Podosky, 2021)



Abramson, 2014:

Gaslighting = **emotional manipulation** that leads someone to **question the reliability of their thoughts, perceptions, and memories.**



Kirk-Giannini, 2022:

Gaslighting = placing the victim in a **dilemma** where they must **choose between risking social or relational consequences** by trusting themselves or **doubting their ability to tell what's going on**



ECUMENICAL CONCEPTION OF GASLIGHTING:

Gaslighting is a kind of social interaction ...

... where an **agent (or group)** induces in a target **significant doubt** about their perceptions, memories, interpretive frameworks, or fundamental epistemic capacities, ...

... typically by **systematically denying, distorting, or challenging** what the target believes to be true.



Standard View on Gaslighting:

Gaslighting is not
permissible (ever)

A painting of a street lamp with a warm glow against a dark, swirling background.

PERMISSIBLE GASLIGHTING:

*Gaslighting is sometimes
permissible in employment
relationships*



EMILY'S BIG PRESENTATION:

Context:

- Emily, a Junior Consultant, is presenting to a volatile, high-stakes client.
- The senior partner, Mark, is supervising.

Situation:

- Mark spots minor error in Emily's data.
- Pointing it out directly now would fluster Emily / risk the client relationship.

Manager's Action:

- In a break, Mark tells Emily client seemed "confused"
- Tells her to re-present the point using different data, as a way to manage the client's understanding.

Outcome:

- Emily, initially confident in her presentation, is shaken by Mark's alternate reality.
- She is left questioning her own judgment and ability to read the room.



Claim: EMILY'S BIG PRESENTATION is Gaslighting

- **Mark induces self-doubt:** challenges Emily's perception of the meeting ("The client was confused"), causing her to doubt her perceptions.
- **Mark distorts reality:** Instead of addressing the error in the data, he frames it as client confusion.
- **Mark undermines her judgment:** By insisting on his version of events ("No, I'm sure"), he directly challenges what Emily believes to be true, undermining her confidence in her professional abilities.



Claim: The Gaslighting in EMILY'S BIG PRESENTATION is Permissible

Main Idea:

- Mark's actions were permissible because they were the **best available way to navigate his competing obligations** and minimize overall harm.

Details:

- **Duty to the Firm:** Mark must protect firm's interests & volatile client relationship.
- **Calculus of Harms:**
 - Directly correcting Emily (publicly or privately) risked shattering her confidence, leading to more errors and potentially losing the client.
 - Mark's actions neutralized the immediate risk, protected Emily from public failure, and preserved the business.
 - Approach allowed for later debrief with Emily, to restore confidence.



Objection: It's Not Gaslighting!

Objection:

- **Mark Wasn't Hard Enough on Emily:** Mark only induced *localized* and likely *transient* self-doubt; True gaslighting requires an attack that is more insidious / systematic, etc.

Two Versions of the Objection:

- **Intention-based:** To be gaslighting, Mark needed to intend something worse (e.g., to undermine Emily's agency, to not ultimately save her, etc.)
- **Harm-based:** To be gaslighting, the harm that Emily experienced must be worse (e.g., having her agency undermined, deeply questioning her sanity, etc.)



Response to 1st Ver of Objection: Intention isn't Needed

Objection Version 1:

- **Intentions Not Bad Enough:** To be gaslighting, Mark needed to intend something worse (e.g., to undermine Emily's agency, to throw her under the bus, etc.)

Response:

- Per Kirk-Giannini (2022, p. 750-752), this kind of “intentionalism” **undergenerates in cases** like Abramson’s description of her grad school experience.
- Intentionalism rules out cases of **systemic gaslighting** (e.g., race, gender-based) without malicious intent



Response to 2nd Ver of Objection: Severity is Degreed

Objection Version 2:

- **Harm Not Bad Enough:** To be gaslighting, the harm that Emily experienced must be worse (e.g., having her agency undermined, deeply questioning her sanity, etc.)

Response:

- **The Effects Were Bad:** Emily is a junior woman in a high-stakes client presentation. Her career is highly important to her. Mark's negative evaluation could really hurt her.
- **Gaslighting Severity Comes in Degrees:** Compare similar ethical notions like lying, manipulation, and coercion. Those come in degrees. It's natural to understand gaslighting similarly: as something defined by its mechanism and whose badness comes in degrees.



TAMING THE NEWBIE

Context:

- Frank, a recent elite college grad, just joined Maggie's team
- Frank is a brilliant but arrogant junior engineer
 - Regularly acts like he's above the team, dismissing their approaches as "inefficient" and "legacy."

Situation:

- Frank creates team friction and disrupts projects.
- Direct feedback isn't working.

Manager's Action:

- Subtle Pushback: Maggie starts using pointed questions to guide Frank toward seeing the flaws in his own proposals.
- Engineered Failure: She strategically assigns Frank tasks where his preferred methods are known to struggle.

Outcome:

- Frank is forced to confront the limits of his academic knowledge,
- He questions his confidence, expresses more uncertainty, and becomes more receptive to the team's existing knowledge and approaches.



Claim: TAMING THE NEWBIE is Gaslighting

- **Maggie induces self-doubt:**
 - Frank was confident in his abilities
 - Maggie undermined that by highlighting issues with his contributions and curating his work environment to make him doubt himself
- **Objection:** But Maggie is giving him a *more accurate picture of the world, not distorting it* (he's bad at working with a team!)
 - Re: Frank's ideas are brilliant. Maggie is distorting reality making Frank less confident in them
- **Objection:** But Maggie is doing it to ultimately help Frank
 - Re: Intention is irrelevant (per previous argument)



Claim: The Gaslighting in TAMING THE NEWBIE is Permissible

Main Idea:

- Maggie's actions = good mentoring + good management in a difficult situation.

Details:

- **Obligation to Get Team to Work Together:** Maggie has to get the team to work together. She's doing that.
- **Exemplary People Developer:** Maggie could have just given up or fired Frank. She instead finds more creative ways to teach Frank to helping him grow and develop as a team player.



Objection: It's Not Gaslighting!

Objection:

- Maggie is doing it to ultimately help Frank, so it can't be gaslighting!!!! *foot stomp*



GEOFF IS GETTING FIRED

Context:

- For four weeks, graphic designer Geoff and his manager, Tom, have been working on a project.
- They had a strong, mutual agreement that creating a new color scheme is essential for success and would take 2 weeks.

Situation:

- At the beginning of week 5, Tom is told by the CFO that Geoff's position must be immediately eliminated to save the firm and the project also needs to be completed ASAP.
- Tom knows Geoff would lose his cool / not finish the project if Geoff thought something unusual was afoot.

Manager's Action:

- Tom asks Geoff to just finish up the project today, using default color scheme.
- Tom denies ever being part of the prior mutual agreement.

Outcome:

- Geoff is left questioning his memory of their collaboration, his own professional judgment about what is essential for a project's success, his ability to align with a manager.



Claim: The Gaslighting in GEOFF IS GETTING FIRED is Permissible

Main Idea:

- Tom did the best he could given his tough position.

Details:

- **Obligation to the Firm:** Qua manager and agent of the firm, Tom has a responsibility to act in his professional capacities in the best interest of the firm (within reasonable bounds).
- **Particular Facts Trapped Tom:** He had to find a way to get the project done and fire Geoff, without first tipping off Geoff. So lying was the best available option.



Objection: Tom Wasn't Licensed to Lie

- **My premise:** Tom has a responsibility to act in his professional capacities in the best interest of the firm (*within reasonable bounds*)
- **Objection:** You might think it's not "within reasonable bounds" for managers to directly and intentionally lie to their employees.
- **Response:** It is ok for managers to directly and intentionally lie *sometimes* (Levine 2022)



PERMISSIBLE GASLIGHTING:

Gaslighting is *sometimes* permissible in employment relationships

BUT WHY?



Employment is a Deeply Asymmetric Relationship

- In **employment**, employers typically dictate/control:
 - **specific tasks** a worker must do
 - **working conditions** and the physical environment
 - the tools and **resources available**
 - overall organizational **culture**
 - How **workers are evaluated**, including raises and promotions, disciplinary actions, demotions, and **terminations**
- Employees retain the right to resign but must **constantly navigate landscape of asymmetrical power**



Gaslighting is Typically Discussed in the Context of *Symmetric Relationships*

- **Baseline Level of Respect:** *All* relationships require a baseline level of respect that requires that you
 - treat others with a minimal dignity,
 - not ignore others' well-being when it's no cost to you,
 - not injure others for fun, etc.
- In friendships / intimate personal relationships, parties should respect each other / see each other as equals in ways that go much beyond that
 - **Requirement to Treat as Equal:**
 - Aristotle: friends (*philia*) love each other for their own sake and wish each other well (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b)
 - Kant: friendship = “the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect” (1996, p. 584)



Why Gaslighting is Sometimes Ok in Employment

- Simplist Picture:
 - Gaslighting is prohibited in relationships that have the **Requirement to Treat as Equal**
 - **Employment lacks that requirement** (as part of its asymmetry)
 - Employee works for the employer, but not vice versa
 - So employment lacks prohibition on gaslighting
- Alternate picture:
 - There's a **general prohibition on gaslighting**
 - In relationships with **Requirement to Treat as Equal**, the **general prohibition is reinforced by the Requirement**
 - In relationships without the Requirement (like employment), **other considerations** (e.g., **obligations to the firm, financial exigency, etc.**) can **override the general prohibition on gaslighting**

SUPPORTING INTUITION: Some teaching relationships are also asymmetric in a way that licenses gaslighting sometimes





Teaching Example: Ari in Logic

Background:

- Ari, a first-year PhD student, is taking a **challenging but required mathematical logic class**
- Ari is doing well in the class but **lacks confidence**; constantly seeks reassurance
- **Professor aims for students to learn to carefully and critically reflect on their reasoning** to be better able to self-evaluate

Particular Situation

- Ari approaches the professor **unsure of their work on a proof**
- The proof is **correct**, and even **uses more sophisticated reasoning than expected**

Gaslighting:

Ari: "Dan, do you have a second? I feel like maybe this proof doesn't work."

Dan: "Yeah, I mean, I see what why you'd be worried about this ... It definitely doesn't match the method we've used on similar problems in class ..."

Ari: "Yeah ... I see what you're saying, but does this approach work?"

Dan: "Well, as we've seen several times before, intuitively plausible methods often fail in unexpected ways ... I would definitely think about this harder if I were you ..."

- Ari is left questioning their reasoning and ability to discern valid proofs independently



Thank You!

Daniel J. Singer
singerd@phil.upenn.edu



Penn
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

