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Gaslighting as a form of violence with increasing frequency

Psychologists have already long been aware of the existence of gaslighting, but recently it has been popularized among social media psychological communities. It seems that all of a sudden, surprisingly, there has been an increased interest in this term. In order to find an adequate translation, in our area gaslighting has been translated as driving someone crazy. This translation has become quite popular and widely accepted in our language, although we psychologists are not very pleased with this translation. On the other hand, you would certainly be very surprised if you came across a translation of this term which reads “gaslight syndrome“. If you are a real fan of movies filmed in the middle of the 20th century, you may already guess the origin of this translation. Gaslight is a movie released in 1944, 6 years after the stage play of the same name had been shown, and it represents the beginning of the story of gaslighting, a term that comes from the movie of the same name. The story of this movie revolves around a husband (Charles Boyer) who manipulates his wife (Ingrid Bergman) into thinking that she is losing her mind. In addition to the obvious manipulation, the husband is constantly playing with his wife's mind, persuading her that she is mentally unstable and driving her to madness, while she tries to maintain her sanity and keep individual identity in this seemingly happy marriage. To put it simply, gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse, i.e. manipulation, whereby the manipulator aimes at making victim feel crazy. The purpose of gaslighting is to make a victim doubt her/his own perceptions, memories and emotions. Therefore, this term represents a malicious and hidden form of mental and emotional manipulation. People who gaslight other people use this form of manipulation for different purposes, such as material (benefiting from the victim) and for the sake of gaining pleasure provided to them by the possibility to exert power and control over the victim. At their games, people who gaslight other people use the most manipulative behaviours, so it is usually difficult to detect gaslighting. The basic patterns of gaslighting are denying and lying. For example, it goes like this: a person A says that she/he does not remember a situation that happened, or that a certain situation did not happen at all. In that way it makes person B (in this case the victim) question her/his memory. Both persons, however, know that it really happened. At that point, the victim begins to question herself/himself, not knowing whether or not something really happened, assuming it is only a figment of her/his imagination, or there has been some confusion. Meanwhile, the abuser favors the victim, declares love, shows affection, acts nice to confuse the victim and present herself/himself in the best possible light. These actions lead the victim to suspect or believe there are some troubles with her/his memory, or that she/he needs to talk with an expert. The abuser often leads her/his victim to rely on her/him for stability and support, until the victim is convinced of having some serious problems and that she/he starts losing her/his mind.

Besides beeing prone to lying and denial, gaslighters use manipulation technique called “boiled frog“. This technique involves gradual habituation to gaslighting situation in such a way that, at the end, the victim is not aware of being in the middle of a cycle of abuse. The gaslighter initially lies only occasionally, takes breaks, pretends to be a loving and considerate person, until the victim completely becomes a part of the game. The abuser occasionally convinces the victim of having misheard something, that something never happened, or denies that the victim said something. Also, the gaslighter very often convinces the victim of having behavioral issues and that she/he needs help. At the beginning, the abuser does not insist on seeking help, but slowly and sistematically plants this idea into victim's mind. The abuser isolates the victim from other people, persuading her/him that people around are not friends. Meanwhile, the abuser often secretly communicates with victim's acquaintances and complains of alleged problems that the victim has. And here it is, the frog is boiled!

As is the case with other forms of violence, there are numerous effects of gaslighting. In the first place, a victim has distorted self-image, loses her/his identity, victim's self-esteem and confidence are damaged, and there is increased social isolation. The effects of gaslighting can also be anxiety, depression, sleep and/or eating disorders. Victims of gaslighting can develop trust issues and experience long-term effects when it comes to friendships and relationships. Gaslighting can happen in any kind of relationship, not only in romantic ones. Men and women, young and older, people with lower and higher levels of education, those who live in a village and those who live in a city, in Asia or Africa - they all can be victims of gaslighting. If you are still facing a dilemma, read again who can be a victim of gaslighting. All!! If a person does not recognize herself/himself as a victim of violence, and this can take years, it is unlikely people around will react. Even if they do so, the victim will already be drawn into gaslighting, without being able to recognize the violence. However, the first step to recovery is that moment when the victim decides to get out of the cycle of abuse. Firstly, the victim should physically detach from the abuser, and then emotionally as well. It is always more difficult to detach emotionally, because for a long time after the victim lives with the illusion that the abuser will change and that everything will be different and better than it was. In practice, things are almost never different or better, but harder and worse. Victim's recovery process is never easy, it is long and painful, but necessary for the purpose of return to normal life and functioning.

This text was created in the framework of the project “Strengthening Resilience of Older Persons and persons with Disabilities during Covid-19 and Future Disasters“, which is supported by the European Commission, the Austrian Development Agency and the Austrian Red Cross, the project partners are the Red Cross of Montenegro and the Union of the Blind of Montenegro.

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