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GASLIGHTING: THE ART OF DRIVING MINORITY GROUPS MAD AT WORK

Gaslighting: A arte de enlouquecer grupos minoritários no ambiente de trabalho

Gaslighting: El arte de enloquecer a grupos minoritarios en el trabajo

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand the extent to which gaslighting actions occur in the work environment. To this end, we conducted an empirical study in which we visited 37 companies of different sizes in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and interviewed 72 workers with different psychographic traits. These interviews and our field notes were subjected to critical discourse analysis. We identified two a priori categories (“racial gaslighting” and “misogynistic gaslighting”), two emerging ones (“LGBTQIAP+-phobic gaslighting” and “instrumental gaslighting”), and we built the axial category (called “pecuniary gaslighting”). The field revealed that gaslighting occurs in all types of companies and is a manipulation strategy used by white heterosexual men not only on non-hegemonic groups, but also against their peers. As implications for management and the theory, this study discusses and reflects on how discriminatory practices have been naturalized and marginalized, not only in the field of studies, but also in organizational culture.

Keywords: gaslighting, misogyny, racism, LGBTQIAP+, manipulation.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo compreender em que medida ocorrem ações de gaslighting no ambiente de trabalho. Para tal, elaboramos uma pesquisa empírica, na qual visitamos 37 empresas de diferentes portes, no Rio de Janeiro e em São Paulo, e entrevistamos 72 trabalhadores com diversos traços psicográficos. Essas entrevistas e nossas anotações de campo foram submetidas à Análise Crítica de Discurso. Identificamos duas categorias a priori (“gaslighting racial” e “gaslighting misógino”), duas emergentes (“gaslighting LGBTQIAP+ -fóbico” e “gaslighting instrumental”), e construímos a axial, denominada “gaslighting pecuniário”. O campo revelou que gaslighting ocorre em todos os tipos de empresas pesquisadas e é uma estratégia de manipulação exercida por homens brancos heterossexuais não só sobre grupos não hegemônicos, mas contra seus pares. Este estudo traz como implicações gerenciais e à teoria a discussão e reflexão sobre práticas discriminatórias têm sido naturalizadas e marginalizadas, não só no campo de estudos, mas na cultura organizacional.

Palavras-chave: gaslighting, misoginia, racismo, LGBTQIAP+, manipulação.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender hasta qué punto se producen las acciones de gaslighting en el entorno laboral. Para ello, realizamos una encuesta empírica, en la que visitamos 37 empresas de diferentes tamaños, en Río de Janeiro y São Paulo, y entrevistamos a 72 trabajadores de diferentes rasgos psicográficos. Estas entrevistas y nuestras notas de campo fueron sometidas a un análisis crítico del discurso. Identificamos dos categorías a priori (“gaslighting racial” y “gaslighting misógino”), dos emergentes (“gaslighting LGBTQIAP+ -fóbico” y “gaslighting instrumental”) y construimos la categoría axial, llamada “gaslighting pecuniario”. El campo reveló que el gaslighting ocurre en todo tipo de empresas y es una estrategia de manipulación ejercida por hombres blancos heterossexuales no solo sobre grupos no hegemónicos, sino contra de sus pares. Este estudio trae como implicaciones gerenciales y teóricas, la discusión y reflexión sobre cómo las prácticas discriminatorias han sido naturalizadas y marginadas, no solo en el campo de estudios, sino en la cultura organizacional.

Palabras clave: gaslighting, misoginia, racismo, LGBTQIAP, manipulación.

INTRODUCTION

Gaslight is a movie from 1944 whose protagonist is Paula, a victim of psychological games and manipulation carried out by her husband Gregory.

Paula is the sole beneficiary to the estate of a famous opera singer (Alice), who is murdered after her home is broken into, but whose valuable jewels are not taken. After her aunt's murder, Paula, who was living in London, moves to Italy, where she meets and marries Gregory, who insists on them returning to live in Alice's house. Paula hesitates, as she has no friends in the city; but in the end she gives in.

Claiming he wishes to ease his wife's anxiety, Gregory suggests they move all of Alice's furniture to the attic. In this process, Paula finds a letter, written by a stranger called Sergis Bauer, addressed to her aunt.

Gradually, Gregory cuts his wife off from the outside world, saying that she is paranoid and that everything he is doing is for her own good, because she is highly on edge and imagining things. Paula starts to believe that she is imagining things, that she has a behavioral disorder, and that she should not go out in public or trust anyone. Meanwhile, the husband is jealous and accusing whenever anyone asks about his wife.

Gregory, who is actually Sergis Bauer, Paula's aunt's killer, is determined to gain possession of the jewels and believes they are hidden in the house's attic. So he makes up business trips so that he can sneak up the stairs at the back and search for them.

As the whole house is lit by gas lamps, every time Gregory switches on the light in the attic, it dims the lighting in the rest of the house. This startles Paula, who is also sure she hears footsteps in the room above.

Gregory not only assures Paula that she is imagining things, but also suggests that since they returned to London his wife has been very tired and that her memory is unreliable. He subtly arranges things for it to appear to Paula and everyone around her that she is a kleptomaniac and that she has been hiding objects and moving furniture and pictures around the house. When the husband confronts Paula about these facts and events, she obviously has no memory of them, which only confirms Gregory's "suspicion" that his wife is delusional and suffering from mental problems. Little by little, Paula's trust in her own judgment, ability to reason, and mental faculties deteriorates dramatically.

Gregory's goal is to convince Paula that she is going crazy so that she will get out the way and he can take over the house in order to find the jewels. The gaslighting the movie's title refers to is Gregory's attempt to convince Paula not to trust her own judgment and faculties; that is, not to trust herself. Using this movie as a metaphor, to what extent is the same gaslighting strategy used in organizations to dismiss the complaints and pleas of non-hegemonic groups, such as LGBTQIAP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and other sexual orientations and gender identities) individuals, women, and blacks? That is our research question.

To answer it, we conducted an empirical study in organizations of various sizes from different industries in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In addition to the multiple visits, which resulted in observations recorded in our field diary, we also interviewed individuals of different identity profiles who work in them. In the end, we seek to contribute to building a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the relationship between gaslighters and individuals silenced and neglected by hegemonic organizational discourses, as well as presenting practical implications and a research agenda to advance studies on the subject.

GASLIGHTING AND MALE HEGEMONY: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In essence, gaslighting has been used to categorize involuntary hospitalization as a form of abuse (Lear & Hale, 2020) and, in the context of interpersonal relationships, it refers to manipulation by psychological means when an individual's sanity is questioned (Fordon, 2019). Gaslighting is a manipulative, dishonest behavior (Abramson 2014), which is also manifested in social relationships in work environments (Paige, 2019). Thus, gaslighters are individuals who make false statements, deny true statements made by their victim(s), with the specific intention of destabilizing them, undermining their confidence in their senses and sense of reality (Davis & Ernst, 2019).

Gaslighters share the following characteristics: they cannot tolerate the possibility of anyone disagreeing with or criticizing them, nor do they accept others living, acting, or behaving differently from what they think is right (Abramson, 2014). Gaslighting is used as a tool of manipulation that aims to neutralize criticisms or even the possibility of them, by undermining the victims' credibility and ability to express themselves and questioning their self-image (Suskind, 2020).

The gaslighting process can be categorized as epistemic or manipulative. In the first case, gaslighters act through implicitly claiming a position of superiority. Thus, from the victim's perspective, there is moral and psychological pressure, which robs them of their epistemic self-confidence; that is, their self-conception as an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgment (Sinha, 2020). No matter how much the victim trusts themselves and their judgement and memory, the underlying challenge remains of how to confront the epistemic disagreement of others (Stark, 2019). The manipulative case is when the gaslighting is disguised as protection or even a compliment, such as claiming that the victim is "too nice," "a pure soul," or "naïve" (Stark, 2019).

With regard to motivation, gaslighting is a process of identity projection (Suskind, 2020); when something bothers the gaslighter, without them being able to identify or recognize why, they hold someone else at fault. One simple projection process would be when someone who does not recognize they are angry starts to fearfully question whether others are angry with them (Abramson, 2014). However, the projection process becomes harmful when they need someone else to be the object of their anxiety, frustration, or dissatisfaction. In this process, the victims often question their own understanding of reality. According to Podosky (2021), it depends on the linguistic order in which the manipulation occurs.

These two types of manipulation strategy presented reinforce what Van Dijk (2011) proposes as the manipulation strategies that are discursively established based on the relationship between discourse and knowledge. Indeed, what connects the discourse with the social aspect is cognition, with it being understood that this occurs individually (mental models) and collectively (social cognition and social memory), based on socially shared knowledge and beliefs (Van Dijk, 2011).

The practice of gaslighting has been the object of study in different areas of knowledge, whether by the social psychology of work, when interpreting the signs of disturbances in the behavior of individuals, personality traits, toxic relationships, narcissism, racism (Johnson, Nadal, Sissoko, & King, 2021), whether in the area of social sciences and labor relations, by associating this phenomenon with the characteristics of leaders and individuals in organizations, whose abuse of power reveals behind the scenes of companies with manipulation practices, sometimes very close to harassment and which, at the limit, result in psychological suffering and damage, especially to non-hegemonic and minorized groups (Sweet, 2019).

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, gaslighting is an abusive technique used by narcissists in which the victim's reality is rewritten, judgment is impaired and there is an undeniable shift in their mental balance, as the narcissist tries to break the victim's spirit in the cruelest game of mind control (Calef & Weinschel, 1981). Strictly speaking, it is the reification of male hegemony (Pullen, Thanem, Tyler, & Wallenberg, 2016) and heteronormativity (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2013), whose objective is to hijack the social capital of non-hegemonic groups (Bourdieu, 2010).

In fact, as it is a form of psychological abuse, which is constructed through the reinforcement of ideas and beliefs, and the manipulation of the victims' mental state and physical environment (Roberts & Andrews, 2013), gaslighting is directly associated with a dominant group (Tobias & Joseph, 2020). Generally, gaslighters are male individuals who use this strategy to establish or reproduce social relationships that generate and ensure their dominance (Carpenter, 2018).

Therefore, in this research, we will dedicate the theoretical framework not to the characteristics and social constructions of marginalized non-hegemonic groups, but exclusively to male hegemony, whose logic institutionalizes the concepts of "normal", "natural" and "common" (Carrigan, Cornell, & Lee, 2018) and substantiates gaslighting practices against these groups (Tobias & Joseph, 2020). It is also worth mentioning that, although groups at a social disadvantage, in vulnerability and in constant struggle against the privilege of dominant groups are called non-hegemonic groups.

Male hegemony lies in the question of how a particular group of men – white, heterosexual, with access to economic capital – seizes privileged positions of wealth and power in the social corpus and is able to legitimately naturalize and reproduce relations that generate and ensure their dominance (Bourdieu, 2010). It manifests itself in and permeates all social relationships, as it is exercised in the name of a symbolic principle known and recognized by both the dominator and the dominated (Pullen et al., 2016).

Thus, ideological control operates discursively as a form of domination operationalized from terms that represent supposed "superior" powers, such as those of nature, God, science, reason or the people, widely used to legitimize the superiority of men, whites and straights, and naturalize their strategies of oppression (Gomes & Felix, 2019), based on what is "natural", a

supposed need for control exercised by men over other people, “created by God”, from the point of view of the definition between gender roles, or “scientifically proven”, as can be exemplified in cases in which man is sought to be stronger, more rational, firmer, among other discursive constructions that build this place of power and oppression (Dijk, 2011).

Gaslighting and male hegemony thus extend beyond violence in interpersonal relationships, creating and exacerbating power imbalances, and therefore offer an opportunity to deepen the analysis and identification of these unrecognized and gendered forms of power and their mobilization in labor relations in a number of situations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In the field research, non-participant observations were carried out in 37 companies (21 in São Paulo and 16 in Rio de Janeiro), from different industries and of different sizes, in which researchers’ access was via consultancy, training or invitation. Each company was visited, on average, three times over a period of 30 months, each visit lasting between two and six hours, during which field notes were taken. We also conducted 72 face-to-face interviews with professionals from the most different psychodemographic profiles.

According the ethical precepts of the research protocol, the following measures were observed: the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research; the anonymity and confidentiality of their speeches was guaranteed; and their authorization for the conversation to be recorded was requested. The research protocol, as well as the study, was further submitted to and approved by a research ethics committee.

The dialogue was divided into two parts: in the first part, demographic data were collected (gender, sexual orientation, age, ancestry, education, area of training, position and company) and, later, there was a discussion about personal and professional experiences of these individuals. For the purposes of analysis, we grouped respondents into four distinct self-declared identities: a) white heterosexual men (WHM¹); b) women; c) black and d) LGBTQIAP+. Of those interviewed who held managerial positions, 12 were WHM, six were women, two were black and two were gay.

Briefly, companies and respondents were classified as follows:

Table 1. Respondents’ profile

Type of business	WHM	Women	Black	LGBTQIAP+
Multinational	16	8	3	6
National (large sized)	5	5	1	1
Small	5	3	1	2
State-owned	2	2	3	2
Family	3	1	2	1
Total	31	19	10	12

Source: the authors.

1 In this text, this acronym also stands for ‘white heterosexual man’, singular.

In the case of intersectionality (for example, black homosexual women), the respondent's speech was allocated according to her narrative, that is, contextualized with the social action expressed by the argument, which could be her role as a woman or her role and identity as a LGBTQIAP+ person. Under the postmodernity view, subjects have multiple simultaneous identities that coexist (Hall, 1997), which leads them to create new paths, even if at the cost of deep and painful sanctions towards an identity reorganization; at the limit, “a quest to become another” (Revuz, 1998, p. 227). This reinvention of the self is what we call identity displacement, that is, the movement of coming and going that takes the subject from one place (including discursive position) to another (Neves, 2008). We will use these two terms and examples to analyze the interviewees.

The interviews were transcribed and submitted to critical discourse analysis (CDA), as we consider that subjects constitute and are constituted by these actions and that discourse is a social practice which constitutes social structures, at the same time that it is shaped and restricted by these structures (Fairclough, 2013). To treat the data, we use CDA (Dijk, 2011), in which the discourse, when constituting and being constituted by social practices (Fairclough, 2013), has social cognition as a bridge between discursive structures and social structures. Thus, when analyzing, from the discourses, the knowledge that is shared by a certain group of people, we reveal the way in which ideological structures act to legitimize and marginalize social groups.

By comparing our field notes with the reports from the employees, we identified two *a priori* categories, two emerging ones, and the axial. The *a priori* ones are “racial gaslighting” (Davis & Ernst, 2019) and “misogynistic gaslighting” (Stark, 2019); the emerging ones were labeled “LGBTQIAP+-phobic gaslighting” and “instrumental gaslighting”; and, finally, the axial was called “pecuniary gaslighting.”

FINDINGS

We start from the ontological premises that the realities of individuals are built from the language of their personal experiences, therefore an individual and his world are inseparable elements (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020), that social and discursive structures are related from a context composed of participants, their roles and objectives, which configure the spatio-temporal situation (Dijk, 2011), and that the relations of domination start from the articulation between the perspective of individuals and the way in which the discourses reveal knowledge and social/collective practices.

Gaslighting: What’s That Whining Coming from the Sapucaí?

We used the 1987 samba theme of the Estácio de Sá samba school (*Que tititi é esse?* or “What’s that tittle-tattle?”) as inspiration for the title of this subsection. Indeed, workforce diversity has been incorporated into the business speak of mostly WHM managers and referred to as “buzz,” “a fad,” or “tittle-tattle.”

The first lexical choice denotes the reproduction of corporate media jargon by a company strategy that aims to capture the public's attention. In this case, diversity policies would be no more than a marketing action for appearances sake (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009). In turn, "a fad" refers to something temporary, which suggests that diversity policies should not be taken seriously or respected. In fact, this disregard is made evident by the use of the lexical choice "tittle-tattle," which relates to ideas of confusion, ruckus, or disorder, which are antonyms of management, planning, and organization, all elements that are considered essential values in organizational life.

In the interviews with the non-hegemonic groups, the most repeated lexical choices were "daily battles," "prejudice," "fussiness," and "whining," which denote disregard for and dismissal of the pain these individuals feel. In their speech, the women, LGBTQIAP+ individuals, and non-whites (not all of them self-identified as black) repeatedly stated that when they complained of discrimination or bullying, they repeatedly heard, namely from the WHM, answers such as "that's your impression," "don't be silly," "of course not, read the company's policy and ethical code."

Blacks, women and LGBTQIAP+ who held managerial positions perceived themselves as victims of this practice, that is, their identities made them targets of coordinated attacks among the WHM.

These discourse fragments suggest that the gaslighters use the tactic of displacement; that is, they create projections ("*the company's policy and ethical code*") or image games ("*your impression*") to dismiss the arguments of the non-hegemonic groups, as well as distracting the audience round about. This way, they displace attention from the facts, allegations, and evidence by questioning the judgment capacity and sometimes even the character of the victims of the discriminatory actions or comments. These aggressors wipe out the possibility of their victims' having an autonomous locus of thought, judgment, or action (Spear, 2019), in a game of manipulation, the main constitutive element of the different gaslighting strategies (Fordon, 2019). These are presented below.

***A Priori* Category 1: Racial Gaslighting**

In this first *a priori* category, built based on the research of Davis and Ernst (2019), we grouped the speech of the individuals who self-identified as non-white, which suggested that gaslighting is a process that depends on racial spectacles, as revealed in the following discourse event:

"It is common for us to hear, here in Brazil, that there is no history of races, that we are a racial democracy, and the past (slavery) was left in the past; but the whole top tier are whites. The blacks are the security guards and the lady serving coffee."

In this speech, our interlocutor identifies a paradox revealed in the "*racial democracy*" and "*the blacks are the security guards and the lady serving coffee*" antagonism. Indeed, no matter how evident the gap is between white and black employees, this is always denied by the dominant group, who dismisses any and every complaint with the argument that in our country "*there is no history of races.*" There is an explicit absence of critical reflection on the

inequalities resulting from the years of slavery, exemplified by the interviewee when presenting the professional positions of the black employees in the company.

Along the same line of argument, one WHM employee of the same organization stated that *“this is one of the best places to work. It was in Exame [the Brazilian business magazine]. We have a great HR policy. Everyone here is the same.”* This argument is backed up by a publication in the business media to dismiss the paradox indicated by the black employee. Moreover, the perversity of the naturalization and indisputability of this meritocratic pretense defended in the lexical choice *“here everyone is the same”* lies in the fact that any space for criticisms or complaints is eliminated. This configures epistemic gaslighting, as it robs the blacks of their self-confidence. In fact, this employee wondered *“how can I go up against Exame?”* and *“how can I question the company’s policy and not put my job at risk?”* adding that *“the company’s policies were devised by whites for whites, along with the laws.”*

Moreover, the use of the first person plural, in the lexical choices *“we have a great HR policy”* and *“everyone here,”* evokes the idea of group based on the construction of a differentiation between “us” and “them” (Van Dijk, 2011). This discursive meta-strategy discursively builds a positive view of the group and one of differentiation from others, creating ideological homogenization and reinforcing a sense of not belonging to those who believe in the idea presented.

These discourse fragments denounce how organizational policies are used as a rhetorical and argumentative resource to assert that the organization is open to diversity, even when this is not experienced by marginalized groups. This discursive strategy is based on the use of an official, institutional document that aims to build an image of neutrality and fairness, a *“great HR policy.”* Moreover, another argumentative resource is to present an institutional document, legitimized by an external organization with a good social reputation, and use it to endorse the equality argument. With this, the differences are ignored between what is written down on paper and day-to-day practices, besides the other interests that permeate the editorial process of the business media.

The displacement between what is argued based on these HR policies and the employee’s report shows how these policies in the company analyzed are, in practice, reduced to mere narratives, which conceal the existence of a central power structure. They are a tool of domination, whose aim is to ensure the privileges of whites and subjugate any dissonant voice.

This manipulation and domination game is built in such a way that the victims lose their self-conception as an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgment (Sinha, 2020). Thus, racial gaslighting is a strategy that reifies the historical construction of Brazil and the economic, political, and social processes that perpetuate, normalize, and naturalize the supremacy of the European colonizer.

A Priori Category 2: Misogynistic Gaslighting

This category was built based on the studies of Fordon (2019), which elaborated on manipulative gaslighting (Podosky, 2021) by WHM, whose main goal is to undermine women, denying and dismissing their speech, testimonies, and potential complaints. From this perspective, this strategy

constitutes an instrument for control and exercising power, so that the rules and norms of the patriarchy are followed, discouraging women from making accusations against their aggressors. The repetition and success of this tactic enable WHM to go unpunished and, moreover, it incentivizes their peers to be accomplices and behave in the same way, thus consolidating and perpetuating hegemonic masculinity.

Our interviewees stated that they are systematically ignored and silenced within social interactions in the corporate environment and, when they point this out, they are dismissed and ridiculed. This is revealed in the following discourse fragments, which we chose because they portray and summarize the testimonies of our 19 interviewees:

“In meetings, we are constantly interrupted.”

“I make a proposal and I’m ignored; a man says the same thing and everyone else agrees.”

“It’s no use shouting, kicking and screaming, banging the table, making a complaint in the company; they always say it’s my impression, it’s not that way at all, I’m just whining.”

“If I complain, they say it’s because it’s my ‘time of the month’ or I need a boyfriend.”

Misogynistic violence is apparent in the failure to recognize the space and right to speech of women, expressed by the lexical choices *“interrupted”* and *“I’m ignored.”* The women are also ridiculed, as if their indignation was the result of alleged physiological causes (*“time of the month”*) or the lack of a man in their life (*“need a boyfriend”*). This is one characteristic of gaslighting, where the possibility of any criticism or complaint is reduced to mere impressions or *“whining.”* Hence, the victims’ ability to express themselves and their credibility are undermined and their self-image is called into question (Davis & Ernst, 2019).

In the specific testimony of one black woman, misogyny was characterized as a fundamental element of the social system, in which undisciplined women are subjected to various types of aggressions and hostile treatments. This aims to *“domesticate them”* (lexical choice used by the interlocutor) and force them to obey the rules of the patriarchal game, which determines that females should be docile, friendly, graceful, and modest.

From our field notes, we understood that misogyny is imposed through the displacement component of gaslighting. That is, men (or their peers and allies) who are accused of abuse or aggression by women punish them for making such accusations by attributing faults to them in order to “explain” those accusations.

The field notes were shown to be essential for revealing the ideology behind the discourses made, as well as their meanings, beliefs, and context: who is speaking/writing; what about, for whom, when, and to what end (Van Dijk, 2011).

The faults used to describe the women relate to the character or nature of the defect attributed. It all depends on how challenging it is for the man accused to deny the accusation. The stronger the evidence of abuse is, the harder it is to displace the accusation. Here, the fault is portrayed as a compliment, as revealed in the following fragments of discourse from a WHM: “*women are very detailed and meticulous,*” “*they are very fragile and anything can hurt them,*” or even “*they want to get involved in everything, control everything, as if they were mothers.*”

The ideological frameworks in these discourse fragments point to negative information about the person, disowning them from the group (Van Dijk, 2011). This same strategy can be used in positive self-descriptions, when painting the company and its leaders as fair, impartial, and open to diversity as opposed to the people who claim to be victims of oppressive actions, who are made to appear wrong, fragile, or dramatic.

One interviewee claimed she was interrupted in a meeting and, at the same time, the man accused denied this and was backed up by another three men, who denied it had occurred and accused her of being mixed up. However, what most shocked this interlocutor was the deafening silence from the other two women present in the meeting, including the director, who was leading the discussion on strategic planning.

This report suggested the existence of misogynistic gaslighting and that this is a collective phenomenon, as it relies on the complicity of other WHM in this game, with the aim of inducing women to suppress or doubt their own feelings and judgments, as occurred with Paula, the protagonist of Hamilton’s play. Thus, as it is a collective, joint, and coordinated action, generally conducted in public, it can be considered as a form of psychological oppression (Suskind, 2020). The second finding is that women can also use this strategy to manipulate other women. This suggests that gender is not a hermetic category and that the organizational hierarchy and social differences should be considered in this discussion.

Finally, the women complained of another misogynistic gaslighting tactic, which we called displacement. This occurs when it is implausible for the man accused to deny he committed a social transgression. This occurred when one employee was denounced for sexual harassment during a company party. The incident was witnessed by various employees, who testified in favor of the victim. When put under pressure, the perpetrator admitted that his behavior was unacceptable, but he sought to minimize the damage by arguing that he was only complimenting his colleague (by calling her “*hot*”) and fooling around (by rubbing her back). On the same occasion, this WHM’s colleagues, also in a playful tone, said it was the victim’s own fault for being harassed, because “*she’s too pretty*” and “*dresses provocatively.*”

When it involves questions of sexual harassment, misogynistic gaslighting uses the macho values of society. These say that being sexually desired is a positive thing, so women should think that it is only flirting and that not liking gallantry is a sign of immaturity. Consequently, they tolerate it, overcome any discomfort, and often even criticize other women who complain of harassment. This macho behavior on the part of some women weakens all of them.

Misogynistic gaslighting makes the women responsible for their complaints, given that they are not reliable and caused by their own flaws. The repetition and naturalization of this strategy makes women believe they really are flawed and that their negative feelings are caused by a personal defect and not by the behavior of men. Misogynistic gaslighting is ultimately a strategy of psychological oppression, which embeds feelings of stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification, used to punish women who challenge macho society. For example, through sexual objectification, women are instigated to strongly identify with their bodies – to see their appearance and adornments as highly important. At the same time, they are ridiculed for having such inferior concerns and are led to believe that these are derived from their female nature, instead of from their exposure to sexual objectification.

While the literature has already pointed to the existence of racial gaslighting (Davis & Ernst, 2019) and misogynistic gaslighting (Fordon, 2019), the field revealed the existence of other categories, such as LGBTQIAP+-phobic gaslighting, which is discussed below.

Emerging Category 1: LGBTQIAP+-phobic Gaslighting

As occurs with the previously discussed non-hegemonic groups, the LGBTQIAP+ individuals also signaled being victims of gaslighting, given that their affective-sexual orientations are pathologized. In fact, both our field observations and the discourses of most of the interviewees from all groups revealed the heteronormative character that prevails in corporate environments and that influences the social relationships that occur in these arenas.

Three interviewees from this group complained that LGBTQIAP+-phobic gaslighting is disguised through what in the digital world is called trolling, which by definition are supposedly well-humored behaviors or comments that seek to mock or tease someone, without that subject perceiving what is occurring.

Trolling refers to a so-called “in-joke” or dog whistle, in reference to the tool not heard by humans, but that can be captured by dogs. In practice, it consists of the use of (verbal and non-verbal) symbols and codes that appear to have no negative connotation. In reality, however, their content reproduces and reinforces racist, prejudiced, homophobic, and xenophobic ideas.

In social interactions, only those who belong to the same social group understand these codes. However, there is the potential risk of conflict when an outsider deciphers the message and accuses the perpetrator (known as the troll). The latter tends to deny the complaint and allege that the complainer is merely delusional. Once again, we observe the manipulation game, which is the main characteristic of gaslighting.

Also in these testimonies, it was suggested that the reason these codes are spoken about so little is an intentional action of these radicals to spread their hate messages surreptitiously. Our interlocutors drew a parallel with members of the Bolsonaro government who repeatedly use these gestures and associated the conservative discourse of the current federal administration with the deterioration in the quality of social life of LGBTQIAP+ people, even in corporate environments. This was revealed in the following discourse fragment:

“It’s become normal to abuse gays; Chico’s [i.e. Chico Buarque’s] song has never been so current: throw stones at Geni, throw shit at Geni, she’s there to be beaten, she’s good for spitting on, damned Geni.”

The lexical choice “Geni” refers to the male homosexual stereotype, ridiculed in many movies, soap operas, and literary novels. Genis are robbed of their humanity and are made the object of entertainment, jokes, anecdotes, and vulgar language, whose role is to edify a collective language that institutionalizes the concepts of “normal,” “natural,” and “common” (Carrigan et., 2018). They provide a counterpoint to the values perceived as masculine: “courage,” “autonomy,” “adventure,” and “group solidarity” (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2013). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the choice to call them Geni reproduces a more complex discursive and social context. In the song “Geni e o Zepelim”, by Chico Buarque, Geni, whose given name is Genivaldo, is a transvestite who suffers aggression and humiliation in her city.

LGBTQIAP+-phobic gaslighting is characterized by this linguistic practice, which simultaneously disguises and reinforces LGBTQIAP+-phobic attitudes, as well as making this non-hegemonic group less credible.

This manipulative strategy to discredit LGBTQIAP+ individuals, their speech, testimonies, and potential complaints is based on the association of homosexual men with supposed feminine weaknesses; of bisexuals with indecision; and of transsexuals with mental disorders. Thus, WHM rob these individuals of their social capital (Bourdieu, 2010). They dismiss them and compromise their professional advancement by signaling that they lack attributes valued in the corporate world. Moreover, they intimidate many who have not come out regarding their affective-sexual or gender orientation.

Throughout our field research, we perceived that gaslighting is a strategy that is mostly used by WHM, but also that its victims are not limited to non-hegemonic groups. It can also be used against other WHM when there is something greater at stake. We therefore identified the second emerging category, which we called “instrumental gaslighting.”

Emerging Category 2: Instrumental Gaslighting

The field also revealed that it is mistaken to understand gaslighting as solely a discrimination strategy and actions that reify the misogyny, the racism, and LGBTQIAP+-phobia ingrained in Brazilian society.

This art of psychological manipulation, whose goal is for the victim to be perceived by others as crazy or incapable, is also used as a tool in organizational disputes. In this case, the victim can be anyone, including a WHM, as reported in the following fragment of discourse from João, an employee of a multinational in Rio de Janeiro:

“Me and Alberto had always been friends. We joined the company at the same time, we worked in the same team, we always went to happy hour together, and

our families are, I mean [pause] were [pause] friends. When an opening appeared to work in São Paulo, a better position, higher salary, our boss said that one of the two of us would get the job. From that point on, Alberto changed. He made a point of always insinuating I was very long-winded, that I was confusing when I spoke. He even did that in meetings and so I'd ask those nearby: "Do you think so too?" I think even I believed what he said about me. I don't think I was ever the same after that. I can't trust anyone any more, not even myself (...) He got the promotion."

The logic of male dominance (Bourdieu, 2010) presupposes that men are more objective than women (Pullen et al., 2016), and this was the basis for the manipulation carried out by Alberto, which was revealed in our interlocutor's lexical choice "*he made a point of always insinuating I was very long-winded.*" In fact, this strategy was characterized as epistemic gaslighting, given that Alberto, the gaslighter, tacitly claimed a position of superiority (Stark, 2019).

From João's perspective, there was moral and psychological pressure, which undermined his self-confidence and, ultimately, his self-conception as an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgment (Sinha, 2020). Thus, no matter how much he trusted himself, in his own judgement and memory, he was unable to deal with the epistemic discordance of others, as revealed in the lexical choice "*I'd ask those nearby: Do you think so too? I think even I believed what he said about me.*"

In heteronormative male *Weltanschauung*, the worst humiliation that a man can suffer is being transformed into a woman, being feminized, having his virility questioned, or being obliged to behave as if he was a woman (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2013). This was how João perceived himself. By having his (pseudo) behaviors portrayed as feminine, he experienced the same pressure that women face every day: being obliged to be incessantly vigilant of their bodies, exposed to humiliation, and being ignored or silenced (Carrigan et al., 2018).

This category was called instrumental gaslighting, as this behavior is motivated by instrumental reasons. In the case in question, it was shown to be an effective strategy, given that Alberto was successful and João, a WHM, suffered psychologically, just like women, blacks, and LGBTQIAP+ people.

Axial Category: Pecuniary Gaslighting

From reviewing the transcriptions and comparing them with our observations, we found that the four gaslighting strategies identified contained a similar logic and similar tactics.

The central logic lies in misogynistic hostility, a collective phenomenon applied through common actions, which follow culturally accepted and tolerated routines that reflect a prevailing androcentric ideology (Pullen et al., 2016). With regard to tactics, the four gaslighting strategies identified were categorized as epistemic or manipulative (Sinha, 2020; Stark, 2019).

However, regarding motivation, women and LGBTQIAP+ individuals understand that gaslighters are motivated by projection (Abramson, 2014) or by some discomfort caused by issues

that the harassers may be unable to identify or recognize, such as repressed sexuality. This analysis appeared to us to be overly simplistic, and we questioned whether there would be some common motive behind the use of this manipulation strategy. Therefore, we examined once again all of the material collected and identified the axial category, which interconnects the *a priori* and emerging ones. We called it pecuniary gaslighting.

Under the cover of misogyny, racism, LGBTQIAP+-phobia, and peer gaslighting (WHM, in this case) laid the dispute for social capital and, ultimately, a pecuniary return. In fact, androcentric society has institutionalized what is “normal,” “natural,” and “common” (Carrigan, Cornell, & Lee, 2002), as well as overvaluing values associated with masculinity, such as “courage,” “autonomy,” “ability,” “adventure,” and “group solidarity” (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2013). Thus, WHM use various strategies – including gaslighting – to seize privileged positions of wealth and power in society, dismissing non-hegemonic groups or anyone that threatens them, as was the case of Alberto, who attributed traits to João that are defined as feminine (being long-winded and being confusing when speaking).

Pecuniary gaslighting was revealed in the fragment of discourse from one woman, who works in a multinational in São Paulo, when asked why there was discrimination: “*you shake up the story, but unless the penny drops, you won’t find the real motive.*” It was precisely the lexical choice “*penny*” that led to us proposing that gaslighting at work, as in the movie, is not limited to acts of perversity worthy of psychopaths (Calef & Weinschel, 1981). There is always an ulterior motive, that is, a pecuniary return.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In the therapeutic discourse of psychology, gaslighting is generally treated as a relational phenomenon (Lear & Hale, 2020), limited to individual relationships, and the therapist’s aim is to help those who are trapped in abusive relationships to break free and recover from any psychological damage, such as depression (Fordon, 2019). However, in this study, we understood that gaslighting goes beyond that: it is a political and discursive phenomenon embedded in a particular social system.

We argued that the political implications of this phenomenon tend to be intentionally minimized, within the silencing and invisibilizing processes non-hegemonic groups have historically been subjected to. The use of this strategy of emotional violence is shown to be more effective for mobilizing and controlling victims. These end up questioning whether they are really being attacked and, due to their mental faculties and powers of discernment being questioned, they become unsure (Podosky, 2021) and end up displaying behavioral traits that are not valued in the corporate world (Johnson et al., 2021; Paige, 2019).

Gaslighting is ultimately a form of manipulation that, by neutralizing criticisms and even the possibility of these, muffles the victims, dismisses their speech, undermines their credibility, eats away at their self-image, and intimidates them. The main goal of wiping out the possibility of an autonomous locus of thought, judgment, and action goes beyond psychological questions.

The ultimate aim of gaslighting is to preserve and accumulate more social capital (Bourdieu, 2010) and obtain economic-financial advantages.

From a discursive perspective, gaslighting is presented as an act of speech (Searle & Rogers, 1969), that is, an action that is exclusively carried out in a discursive way through language, such as threats, promises, and requests.

With the increase in space that discussions about diversity have gained in the market, companies from different industries, such as those analyzed in this research, have created policies and institutional areas that focus on diversity. This has led to practices of oppression, marginalization, and violence occurring in an increasingly hidden, symbolic, and, as presented in our results, discursive way. Thus, gaslighting can be analyzed as a category of speech acts, unveiling a silent strategy of delegitimizing marginalized groups in the organizational context.

This strategy is mostly used by the dominant group (WHM) to dismiss and, literally, “put a smokescreen” in front of any moves to confront and resist made by women, blacks, LGBTQIAP+ people, and all non-hegemonic groups. By doing so, they ensure themselves the privileges and benefits of being the dominant identity.

Despite all of the minoritized groups having identified WHM as the main potential aggressors, it was not shown whether there is solidarity among them, which would ensure the effectiveness of the manipulation strategies adopted by gaslighters.

In fact, WHM, in one way or another, put women and LGBTQIAP+ people in the same category; indeed, the discursive strategies used to dismiss them are always the same and antonymous of the traits that are socially perceived as masculine. It is therefore clear that under the cover of LGBTQIAP+-phobic discourses lies the misogyny that preceded them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main implications of this study relate to the possibility of building an agenda for researching themes that discuss binomial similarities/differences in the social environment and in the organizational context, especially with regard to broadening and deepening studies on the hidden forms of violence at work. This would open up space for the voice and reinforce the credibility of those who are silenced and neglected by hegemonic organizational discourses.

Although this is an initial, exploratory study, the results of the analysis pave the way for future research on gaslighting practices and violence against non-hegemonic groups in the organizational field, as well as to deepen the theoretical discussions in each of them, specifically women, blacks, LGBTQIAP+ and even those not included in this research, such as the poorest, living in the periphery and low-income areas, physically and mentally handicapped, with partisan affiliations, religious beliefs, for example. Another research path takes place in cases of gaslighting in which individuals present hierarchical differences and belong to different groups and social classes.

The study provides the basis for more systematic research focused on developing and testing the theory, using other analysis methods, such as comparing cases over time and space (comparative and longitudinal case studies).

Another suggestion would be to deepen the analysis of institutional diversity policies in organizations, the official discourses divulged internally and externally, and the practices of symbolic violence recorded in those same organizations. We believe that this would help to track gaslighting practices, given the ambiguity that is imposed on employees who systematically hear that they form part of a diverse company but who experience another reality in practice.

From an empirical viewpoint, organizations are unequivocally responsible for including aspects of social fairness and the quality of life of their employees as a results analysis parameter. This implies recognizing their differences in order to be able to treat them on an equal footing. In light of this, equality in gender, social, and racial relations represents a normative and practical challenge for organizations and institutions. This study also seeks to contribute to organizations creating concrete, consistent, and relevant diversity policies, focused on including marginalized groups and transforming practices. The hope with this is to build organizational spaces that are emotionally safer, healthier, more productive, and more diverse.

NOTE

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