
Gaslighting Experience among Faculty Members in a Higher Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the prevalence, characteristics, and psychological consequences of gaslighting behaviors experienced by college faculty members within a higher education setting, drawing on Sweet's sociological theory of gaslighting and Leary et al.'s sociometer theory. Conducted in a university setting, the research employed a quantitative approach, utilizing descriptive, comparative, and correlational methods to analyze data collected from 83 full-time faculty members through an adapted version of the Gaslighting Behavior Questionnaire (GBQ) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). Results indicate that overall gaslighting exposure among faculty was low, suggesting a relatively psychologically safe work environment. However, significant differences in gaslighting experiences were noted based on age, educational attainment, years of service, and academic department, particularly affecting older faculty, those with advanced degrees, and members of certain departments like Health and Natural Sciences. While self-esteem levels across the sample were generally moderate and did not significantly differ among demographic categories, there was a weak, non-significant positive correlation between gaslighting and self-esteem, implying minimal impact on self-perception in this context. These findings highlight that although gaslighting is not widespread, its presence in specific subgroups warrants proactive interventions, emphasizing the need for institutional policies, awareness training, and psychosocial support systems to safeguard academic staff against subtle psychological manipulation and enhance overall faculty well-being.

Keywords: faculty well-being, manipulation, self-esteem, workplace abuse

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the psychological safety and well-being of employees have become increasingly critical in workplace discussions and organizational research. These concerns are especially significant in academic institutions, where faculty members must navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, hierarchical structures, and institutional pressures that can lead to emotional strain. One emerging topic of interest in this context is gaslighting— a form of psychological manipulation wherein individuals are led to question their own memories, perceptions, or sanity.

The term "gaslighting" originated from the 1938 play "Gas Light," where a husband manipulates his wife into doubting her reality by gradually dimming their gaslights and denying the change. Over time, this concept evolved into a recognized form of psychological abuse that affects people not only in personal relationships but also in professional environments. In academic workplaces, where the exchange of knowledge and collaboration is essential, the presence of manipulative behaviors like gaslighting can severely disrupt trust, productivity, and self-perception.

While gaslighting has been more commonly studied in the context of intimate relationships, there is growing recognition that similar behaviors manifest in the workplace. Unlike overt harassment or aggression, gaslighting is often subtle. It may include denial of events, distortion of facts, blaming, or using dismissive language that invalidates another person's experience. For faculty members, such behaviors can come from peers, superiors, or institutional systems that foster power imbalances. These experiences may significantly affect one's self-esteem, job satisfaction, and overall psychological health.

The theoretical framework grounding this study includes Sweet's sociological theory of gaslighting, which views gaslighting not merely as an interpersonal phenomenon but as a systemic issue rooted in societal inequalities and institutional structures. Sweet's theory emphasizes how race, gender, and class dynamics contribute to the gaslighting experience. Complementing this is Leary's sociometer theory, which posits that self-esteem serves as a social gauge of one's relational value and acceptance. When individuals perceive exclusion or devaluation—such as in a gaslighting interaction—their self-esteem may be adversely affected.

This study explored the prevalence, manifestations, and psychological impact of gaslighting among faculty members within Saint Mary's University, a higher education institution in the Philippines. The primary goal was to assess how gaslighting behaviors are experienced in the academic workplace and whether they have a measurable effect on faculty members' self-esteem. Moreover, the study investigated whether demographic factors such as age, educational attainment, years of service, and departmental affiliation influence gaslighting exposure or self-esteem levels.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a quantitative, descriptive, comparative, and correlational design to explore gaslighting experiences and their relationship with self-esteem among college faculty members. The goal was to quantify the level of gaslighting, identify demographic predictors, and determine whether there is a statistical relationship between gaslighting behaviors and self-esteem levels.

The study was conducted at Saint Mary's University in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya. The institution comprises four major academic divisions: the School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH), the School of Accountancy and Business (SAB), the School of Health and Natural Sciences (SHANS), and the School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (SEAIT). Eighty-three full-time faculty members across these departments participated in the study. These participants had at least one year of teaching experience, which was a criterion for inclusion. Faculty members in administrative roles or those employed on a part-time basis were excluded to maintain consistency in work experience and to avoid administrative bias.

Initially, the researchers intended to use purposive sampling to ensure a diverse yet representative pool of faculty members. However, due to the busy schedules of faculty during final examinations and other institutional responsibilities, the sampling approach was revised to convenience sampling. This allowed the researchers to collect data from available and willing participants without compromising the study's objectives.

Two key instruments were employed in this study. The first was the Gaslighting Behavior Questionnaire (GBQ) developed by Dickson et al. (2023), which consists of ten items specifically tailored to identify gaslighting behaviors in different contexts, including the workplace. For this study, only the portion relevant to workplace exposure was utilized. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always). The internal consistency of the adapted questionnaire was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of .915.

The second instrument was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965. This widely used tool includes ten statements that assess global self-worth using a 4-point Likert scale. Five items are positively worded, while the other five are negatively worded and require reverse scoring. Higher total scores indicate higher self-esteem. The RSE has been validated in multiple studies and cultural contexts, including the Philippines.

The data gathering process followed ethical research standards as mandated by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. After the instruments were validated and permissions

obtained, the researchers began distributing printed copies of the questionnaires directly to faculty members in their offices. An informed consent form was provided, ensuring participants were aware of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures.

Upon collection, the data were encoded and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were employed to profile the respondents and summarize the levels of gaslighting and self-esteem. To compare differences across demographic groups, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used. Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to evaluate the relationship between gaslighting behaviors and self-esteem scores.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1. Profile of the Respondents

Table 1

Profile of the Respondents

Profile	Groups	Frequency (n=83)	Percentage
Age	22–32 years old	42	50.6
	33–43 years old	30	36.1
	44–55 years old	11	13.3
Highest Educational Attainment	Bachelor's Degree	50	60.2
	Master's Degree	33	39.8
	Doctorate Graduate	0	0.0
Years of Service	1–10 years	70	84.3
	11–20 years	9	10.8
	21–35 years	4	4.8
School department	SAB	17	20.5
	SEAIT	20	24.1
	SHAN	21	25.3
	STEH	25	30.1

The respondents in the study are mainly younger faculty members, with over half (50.6%) aged between 22 to 32 years, indicating a trend of newer hires in academic institutions. A smaller percentage (13.3%) are mid-career faculty aged 44 to 54, suggesting a potential gap in this age group. Most respondents (60.2%) hold a bachelor's degree, while 39.8% have a master's, and none has a doctorate, reflecting a focus on early-career faculty. Additionally, 84.3% have ten years or less of service, contributing to dynamics related to gaslighting in academia.

The distribution across school departments shows that the largest group (30.1%) is from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities, followed by the School of Health and Natural Sciences (25.3%), the School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (24.1%), and the School of Accountancy and Business (20.1%). This diversity highlights differences in culture and support systems within departments and emphasizes the insights into gaslighting behavior among a predominantly young, early-career faculty group.

Section 2. Level of Gaslighting Experienced by College Faculty Members

Table 2

Level of Gaslighting Experienced by College Faculty Members

Statements	Mean	SD	QD
1. My workmates have told me something has not happened when it has, and made me doubt my memory of the event.	0.96	0.74	Low

2. My workmates have insisted that I have done something I have not and made me doubt my recollection.	1.10	1.09	Low
3. During an argument, they have told me that everyone agrees with them and made me feel like my perspective is incorrect. I am alone in feeling this way.	0.92	0.97	Low
4. When I question their lies, they have acted hurt and made me feel bad for challenging them.	0.96	0.88	Low
5. When I have brought up the problem, they have told me that I am imagining the issue and there is nothing to worry about, making me feel I am too sensitive.	0.99	0.99	Low
6. When I have stated I do not feel respected by them, they have told me that no one else would put up with me and made me feel like I am the problem	0.53	0.67	Very Low
7. When inquiring if they completed a task, which I asked them to do, they have said that they do not remember me asking and made me question my memory.	0.91	0.94	Low
8. When I discuss problems, they have told me that I am complaining and should simply try harder, making me feel confused.	1.02	1.05	Low
9. When I do not do something that they asked me to do, they have said that I always behave this way and make me feel as though this was a pattern of behavior when it is not.	0.86	1.01	Low
10. They have told me that I should not behave in a certain way as it is 'not like me' thus making me question my identity.	0.96	0.82	Low
Overall	0.922	6.96	Low

Legend: 0.00-0.80 (very low), 0.81-1.60 (low), 1.61-2.40 (moderate), 2.41-3.20 (high), 3.21-4.00 (very high)

The study on gaslighting experiences among full-time college instructors at Saint Mary's University revealed a generally low level of gaslighting, with a mean score of 0.922. The most common form reported involved doubts about memory ($M = 1.10$), while overt psychological abuse was rare ($M = 0.53$). Compared to findings from other institutions, Saint Mary's results are relatively positive, suggesting a more inclusive and respectful organizational culture. Factors such as the respondents being early-career faculty may influence these findings, as newer faculty might not recognize subtle manipulative behaviors as gaslighting. Despite the low overall concerns, it is emphasized that even occasional gaslighting can harm job performance and self-esteem. Institutions should prioritize awareness, psychological safety, and professional development to identify and address manipulative behaviors in the workplace.

The study reveals that age, educational attainment, and departmental affiliation significantly impact experiences of gaslighting in the workplace. Older faculty members (ages 44–55) reported higher instances of gaslighting compared to younger groups, suggesting greater awareness or sensitivity among them. Those with master's degrees also experienced more gaslighting than their bachelor-level counterparts, indicating that higher qualifications may invite scrutiny or provoke defensive reactions.

Section 3. Level of Gaslighting Experienced When Grouped by Participants Profile Variable

Table 3

Level of Gaslighting Experienced When Grouped by Participants Profile Variable

Profile	Groups	Frequency	Mean	SD	F-value/ t-value	p-value
Age	22–32 years old	42	7.88 ^B	6.33	4.326*	0.016
	33–43 years old	30	9.13 ^B	7.20		
	44–55 years old	11	14.55 ^A	6.61		
Highest educational Attainment	Bachelor's Degree	50	4.88	3.17	-10.926***	0.015
	Master's Degree	33	15.79	5.90		
Years or Service	1–10 Years	70	8.93 ^B	7.01	3.257*	0.44
	11–20 Years	9	7.78 ^C	4.99		
	21–35 Years	4	17.50 ^A	5.26		
School Department	SAB	17	7.00 ^B	2.45	41.411***	0.000
	SEAIT	20	4.00 ^B	2.51		
	SHANS	21	18.24 ^A	2.95		
	STEH	25	7.32 ^B	6.93		

Note: ***significant $\alpha=0.001$, *significant at $\alpha=0.05$, Mean group who do not share a common letter are significantly different from each other.

Although years of service showed no statistically significant differences in gaslighting experiences, longer tenure might still coincide with exposure to manipulative organizational patterns. A significant disparity was noted across departments, with respondents from the SHANS department reporting the highest levels of gaslighting, potentially reflecting cultural and leadership dynamics within that department.

Despite overall low levels of gaslighting, the findings highlight the need for targeted organizational strategies to promote respectful communication and emotional well-being. The study emphasizes the importance of institutional support and open dialogue to prevent escalations of gaslighting and safeguard employee mental health and performance.

Section 4. Level of Self-Esteem in the Workplace

Table 4

Level of Level of Self-esteem in the Workplace

Statements	Mean	SD
1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	3.40	0.56
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	3.33	0.57
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	2.01	0.69
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3.41	0.56
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1.94	0.80

6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	3.28	0.63
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3.33	0.54
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	2.71	0.96
9. I certainly feel useless at times.	2.18	0.86
10. At times I think I am no good at all.	2.27	0.93
Overall	27.84	2.77
QD	Medium	

Statement 4 had the highest mean score (3.41), indicating positive perceptions, while Statement 5 had the lowest (1.94), highlighting a weakness in self-perception. The overall average self-esteem score was 27.84 (SD = 2.77), suggesting a moderate level of self-esteem among participants. This aligns with research indicating that higher self-esteem in youth leads to greater job satisfaction and income later on. However, the relationship between self-esteem and work performance can vary due to contextual factors like role expectations and leadership quality.

Workplace relationships and communication significantly impact self-esteem, with positive interactions enhancing self-worth and negative feedback undermining it. Research shows that supportive environments lead to stronger organizational identification and self-esteem. Conversely, exposure to invalidation can reduce professional confidence. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of respectful communication and psychological safety in maintaining healthy self-esteem and job engagement.

Section 5. Self-Esteem in the Workplace Based on Profile Variable

Table 5

Self-Esteem in the Workplace Based on Profile Variable

Profile	Groups	Frequency	Mean	SD	QD	F-value/ t-value	p-value
Age	22–32 years old	42	27.40	2.87	Medium	1.098 ^{ns}	0.338
	33–43 years old	30	28.23	2.74	Medium		
	44–55 years old	11	28.45	2.34	Medium		
Highest educational Attainment	Bachelor's Degree	50	27.68	2.96	Medium	-0.660 ^{ns}	0.511
	Master's Degree	33	28.09	2.47	Medium		
Years or Service	1–10 years	70	27.77	2.65	Medium	1.345 ^{ns}	0.266
	11–20 years	9	27.44	3.61	Medium		
	21–35 years	4	30.00	2.45	High		
School department	SAB	17	27.12	2.76	Medium	1.185 ^{ns}	0.321
	SEAIT	20	28.60	2.41	Medium		
	SHANS	21	28.19	1.99	Medium		
	STEH	25	27.44	3.47	Medium		

The findings indicate that self-esteem levels did not vary significantly among different age groups ($F = 1.098$, $p = 0.338$). Self-esteem levels are consistent across different age groups, educational attainments, years of service, and school department affiliations, all categorized within a "Medium" range. Research suggests that self-esteem stabilizes in midlife due to

experience and self-acceptance, while educational background and tenure do not significantly influence self-esteem scores. The Job Demands-Resources model supports the idea that long-term job resources can enhance self-esteem, but the current study found no significant variances. Overall, the results emphasize the greater impact of workplace interactions, psychological climate, and support systems on self-esteem, rather than demographic or institutional variables. Consequently, fostering a positive work environment may be more effective in enhancing employee self-worth than focusing on static traits.

Section 6. Correlation Between Gaslighting Behaviors and the Level of Self-esteem in the Workplace

Table 6

Correlation Between Gaslighting Behaviors and the Level of Self-Esteem in the Workplace

		Level of self-esteem
Level of gaslighting experienced	Pearson's r	.140 ^{ns}
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.207
	QD	Very low positive correlation

The analysis explored the relationship between gaslighting behaviors and self-esteem in the workplace, revealing a weak and statistically non-significant correlation ($r = 0.140$, $p = 0.207$). This suggests that greater exposure to gaslighting does not significantly affect self-esteem among the sample studied. Although De Silva (2024) found no direct link between the two, existing literature highlights the negative psychological impacts of gaslighting, including diminished self-worth and professional disengagement. Studies by Farid et al. (2024) and Kukreja and Pandey (2023) connect gaslighting to emotional exhaustion and lower motivation, while Christensen and Evans-Murray (2021) emphasize its detrimental effects on confidence and job performance.

Contextual factors like individual resilience and supportive workplace cultures may influence the weak correlation observed. Research notes that subtle gaslighting might be overlooked, particularly by those with strong coping mechanisms (Patterson, 2021), and that open communication can alleviate its effects (Sweet, 2019). Despite the findings of this study, other literature underscores gaslighting's harmful implications for psychological well-being, as it fosters self-doubt and questions about competence, ultimately undermining self-esteem (Westover, 2024; Crawford-Welch, 2024). Overall, while the study's results are weak, gaslighting continues to be recognized as a significant psychological risk in the workplace.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

There was low gaslighting exposure among faculty which means that their working environment is relatively psychologically safe. However, differences in age, educational attainment, years of service, and academic department affect gaslighting experience. While self-esteem levels across the sample were generally moderate and did not significantly differ among demographic categories, there was a weak, non-significant positive correlation between gaslighting and self-esteem, implying minimal impact on self-perception in this context.

Recommendations

These findings highlight that although gaslighting is not widespread, its presence in specific subgroups warrants proactive interventions, emphasizing the need for institutional

policies, awareness training, and psychosocial support systems to safeguard academic staff against subtle psychological manipulation and enhance overall faculty well-being.

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