

Research Paper

## The Relationship of Gaslighting with Self-blame and Entrapment among Young Females

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### ABSTRACT

While previous researches have explored the psychological impacts of gaslighting and self-blame individually, limited attention has been given to understanding the interrelationship between gaslighting, self-blame, and feelings of entrapment, particularly among young females. This research aims to fill the gap by examining the relationship between gaslighting, self-blame, and entrapment among young females. A random sample of young females aged (18-30 years) was asked complete assessments measuring their experiences of gaslighting, tendencies towards self-blame, and feelings of psychological entrapment. The study found significant positive relationships between all three variables. Higher experiences of gaslighting were associated with higher levels of self-blame and entrapment, and greater self-blame was also positively related to greater feelings of entrapment. The findings suggest that higher experiences of gaslighting are associated increased self-blame and feelings of entrapment, highlighting the psychological impact of emotional manipulation on young females.

**Keywords:** *Gaslighting, Self-Blame, Entrapment, Young Females, Mental Health*

Gaslighting can be understood as a psychological manipulation tactic where one person manipulates the other person to an extent where they question their perception of reality and doubt themselves. This tactic is often used to push off the blame of your own shortcomings and mistreatment of the other onto the other person in a relationship. This form of psychological and emotional abuse is not only confined to the realm of romantic relationships but extends to almost all interpersonal relationships. When the focus is solely on romantic relationships, women tend to be more vulnerable and easy targets of gaslighting because of obvious power imbalances and social inequalities that continue to exist to this date. The term gaslighting as a psychological construct can be traced back to the Award-winning film “Gaslight.” In this suspense thriller, a manipulative husband uses various strategies – such as dimming the gaslights and insisting they remain unchanged – to destabilize his wife’s perception of reality and undermine her mental health. Overtime, gaslighting has entered mainstream vocabulary, experiencing a dramatic surge of 1740% in searches in 2022 and being named the Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year (Merriam-webster, n.d. b). While dictionaries now define the term, the field of psychology is

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yet to establish a universally accepted scientific or operational definition. Despite the widespread familiarity of the concept, a robust, evidence-based understanding of gaslighting remains underdeveloped. Gaslighting is harmful because often than not, victims fail to realize that they are being gaslit. The lack of awareness or the obliviousness due to the insidious nature of the phenomenon itself makes it very tough for the victims to escape and understand the depth of cumulative damage done to their psychological and mental well-being. Gaslighting experiences of women has been studied widely in other contexts like medical, workplace, education etc. The victim goes through 3 phases of gaslighting – disbelief, defense, depression (Stern, 2007). These stages were elaborated upon in another study (Sengkey,2024) –

- **Disbelief** – The experience of gaslighting begins with victims feeling confused due to the alternate version of realities presented to them by the gaslighter. The victim is still sure of their view and hence try to correct the gaslighter which leads to frustration. The gaslighter will now adopt the behavior of arguing and will deny every claim made by the individual (victim) which will eventually cause the victim to give in. Every confrontation will end up with the victim being in the wrong.
- **Defense** - The phase is characterized by the victim experiencing self-doubt about their own views. After being the guilty one in every argument with the gaslighter, the victim feels as if the opinions and views of the gaslighter are correct and eventually follow them. The gaslighter will use the shortcomings and errors of the victim to manipulate the facts, reality and the conflict; making the victim stand guilty. The victim will feel anxious of making mistakes and will admit to ending the conflict.
- **Depression** – The victim begins to believe that the views of the gaslighter are correct and tries to prove the same. The psychological damage has reached to the point where the victim finds making decisions on their difficult and eventually start basing their decisions on the views of the gaslighter. The victim experiences stress and intimidation from the gaslighter. The victim will not argue or express themselves because of the fear of being abandoned or subjected to a silent treatment by the gaslighter. Lastly, the victim will have a sense of wrongness in the relationship. The sociological theory of gaslighting suggest that gaslighting is not just a psychological phenomenon but a social phenomenon too as it is rooted in societal inequalities, especially gender and sexuality. The perpetrator uses this tactic to alter the perception of reality of the victim by employing the stereotypes, power dynamics and structural inequalities that are already prevalent in the society (Sweet, 2019).

### Entrapment

Entrapment can be understood as a mental state where a person feels trapped in a situation or a circumstance, with no possible escape. A person can feel trapped within their own mind - feelings, thoughts and emotions or their environment or relationship. In context of gaslighting, victim can experience psychological entrapment while staying in a relationship that's psychologically debilitating for the individual. According to Gilbert & Allan (1998), entrapment is a psychological concept describing the sensation of being caught in challenging situation with no perceived way to escape. They identified two distinct forms of entrapment – internal and external.

- Internal Entrapment** refers to the feeling of being confined by one's own thoughts or emotions, creating a sense of inescapability from within.
- External Entrapment** involves the perception of being trapped by outside circumstances, where an individual feels powerless to break free from their environment or situation.

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This experience is closely linked to various mental challenges, including depression and anxiety, stress (Taylor et al., 2011), and in more extreme cases, it may even contribute to suicidal thoughts or behaviors (Höller et al., 2022). Entrapment often manifests through feelings of powerlessness, despair, and emotional overwhelm in the face of life's difficulties. There are four phases in which psychological entrapment takes place in abusive relationships and how women respond to that abuse. Ladenburger (1989) outlined these four phases as – binding, enduring, disengaging and recovering.

- **Binding** – In this initial stage victims become emotionally attached to the abuser, often overlooking signs of abuse. This often begins with feelings of love, affection, and trust. The abuser may initially appear charming or caring, which creates a strong emotional attachment. Early signs of control or manipulation may be dismissed or rationalized by the victim. The hope for positive future, denial of abusive behaviors, and the desire to preserve the relationship prevent the victim from seeing the danger. This emotional investment makes it difficult to walk away when the abuse begins.
- **Enduring** – As the abuse becomes frequent or severe, the victim enters a phase of endurance. They often minimize the abuse, blame themselves for the problems, or believe they can fix the situation by trying harder or being more compliant. There's a focus on coping and surviving rather than resisting. Fear, shame, and confusion grow stronger, often leading to emotional numbing or withdrawal. The victim may still believe the abuser can change or that the relationship will return to how it was in the beginning.
- **Disengaging** – In this critical phase, the victim starts to emotionally detach and gain clarity about the abusive dynamics. Feelings of disillusionment, betrayal, anger and sadness emerge. The realization sets in that the relationship is harmful and cannot be saved through personal effort. This stage involves a significant inner struggle between the desire to leave and lingering emotional bonds or fears. Some victims may begin seeking support, planning an escape, or confronting the abuser, though this is often met with resistance or escalated abuse.
- **Recovering** – This final phase involves healing, self-discovery, and rebuilding a sense of identity outside the abusive relationship. The victim begins to process the trauma, grieve the loss of the relationship, and reclaim their sense of agency. Support from therapy, trusted others, or survivor networks can play a key role here. Recovery is not linear and may not include relapses into self-blame or emotional distress, but overall, it marks a movement towards psychological freedom, empowerment and healthier relationships.

### Self-Blame

“Self-blame is the attribution that the consequences one experiences are a direct result of one's actions or character” (Hooker, 2013). Self-blame is when an individual feels responsible for experiencing a traumatic event and consequent suffering. The study of self-blame has contributed immensely in the studies of depression and guilt. Additionally, it has also been studied in context of victimization. In context of gaslighting, saying that feelings of self-blame can arise in a victim is not far from the reality. The victim can and might blame themselves when manipulated into believing so. Janoff-Bulman (1979) distinguished between two forms of self-blame: behavior-oriented and character-oriented. Character self-blame indicates a maladaptive and self-deprecating reaction, whereas behavior self-blame indicates a more adaptive and control-oriented reaction. The focus of behavioral self-blame is on the individual's actions, specifically how they behaved or did not respond in a

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particular circumstance. Character-related self-blame centers on an individual's character, which is where the emphasis is on how they view themselves. People who engage in character self-blame find it simpler to hold oneself accountable for their personalities and assign blame to their character. According to Miller and Porter (1983), self-blame's nature, intensity, and causation can all fluctuate over time. Women attempted to alter the offending behavior after initially holding themselves accountable for the assault. This study confirms Miller and Porter's findings that women eventually came to blame themselves for allowing the abuse rather than for causing it. Weiner et al. (1971) found that when individuals attribute failure to themselves-specifically, when they view the cause as internal- the blame typically falls on either their ability or their effort. When failure is linked to the perceived lack of ability (characterological self-blame), individuals tend to feel that situation is beyond their control, as ability is seen as largely stable and unchangeable. In contrast, when failure is attributed insufficient effort (behavioral self-blame), individuals are more likely to believe that they can influence the outcome by trying harder or putting in more effort. Thus, characterological self-blame is related ability-based attributions, while behavioral self-blame relates to effort-based attributions. Both forms can negatively affect psychological well-being, but characterological self-blame is especially damaging due to its association with feelings of helplessness and self-worth.

### **METHODOLOGY**

**Aim:** To study the relationship between Gaslighting, Self-Blame and Entrapment among young females.

#### **Objectives:**

- To find the relationship between Gaslighting, Self-Blame and Entrapment among young females.

#### **Hypothesis:**

- There will be significant relationship between Gaslighting and Self-Blame among young females.
- There will be significant relationship between Gaslighting and Entrapment among young females.
- There will be significant relationship between Self-Blame and Entrapment among young females.

#### **Sample & Its Selection:**

- Young females in the age range of 18-30 were randomly selected. (n=150)
- Inclusion Criteria: Young Females between the ages of 18 & 30 and are capable of providing informed consent
- Exclusion criteria: Young Females with serious cognitive problems or those who are unable to offer informed consent and are outside the age range of 18-30 years.

#### **Description Of Tools Employed**

**1. Victim Gaslighting Questionnaire (Bhatti, Shuja, Aqeel & Bokhari, 2021):** This is a tool to assess how often individuals experience gaslighting. It includes a series of items that reflect common gaslighting behaviors, such as minimizing events or causing someone to question their sanity. Respondents rate how frequently they have encountered these experiences, with higher scores indicating a greater frequency of gaslighting. The VGQ was developed based on an extensive review of existing literature on gaslighting, along with detailed focused group discussions involving domestic abuse survivors. The final version

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includes 14 self-report items that explore the emotional, cognitive and behavioral impacts of gaslighting on victims. Each item is rated on 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), yielding total scores between 14 to 70. Higher total scores reflect more severe gaslighting victimization. The scale demonstrates strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha reported at 0.934. Subscales also show high reliability, with correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.955$  and  $0.871$ . Two key constructs measured are "peer disagreement," which captures how others consistently contradict or blame the victim, and "loss of self-trust," which refers to victims reduced sense of confidence in their own judgement and decisions. These aspects also support the scale's content validity.

**2. The Entrapment Scale (Gilbert & Allan, 1998):** This assessment scale of 16 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 0 (not at all like me), 1 (A little bit like me), 2 (Moderately like me), 3 (Quite a bit like me), and 4 (Extremely like me). It assesses the feeling of being trapped, capturing both internal and external dimensions of psychological entrapment.

**3. Self-Blame Scale (Reddy, 2023):** This assessment is a 22-item measure designed to assess how individuals attribute the consequences of stressful events to themselves, including their behavior, thoughts and emotions. It does not include any subscales or dimensions. Each item is rated on 5-point Likert scale: strongly agree (5), agree (4), sometimes agree/disagree (3), disagree (2), strongly disagree (1). Based on the analysis, the scale demonstrates highly reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.891 for 19 items, indicating strong internal consistency. The tool has been standardized for use with adult population in India. The total score calculated by summing all item responses, with no reverse-scored items. Scores range from 22 to 110. Interpretations are as follows: scores below 35 indicate very low self-blame, 35-51 reflect low self-blame, 52-71 average self-blame, 72-89 indicate high self-blame, and scores above 89 reflect very high levels of self-blaming.

### **Procedure:**

Data were collected via Google Forms. Participants completed informed consent, followed by the three standardized tools. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

### **Statistical Analysis:**

The collected data was analyzed using IBM SPSS . The following statistical techniques were applied:

- Descriptive Statistics: Mean and Standard Deviation were computed for each variable to understand the general trends in the data.
- Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation: This non-parametric test was used to determine the strength and direction of association between the three variables i.e. Gaslighting, Entrapment and Self-Blame.

## **RESULTS**

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Gaslighting	40.87	14.344	150
Self-Blame	71.37	18.391	150
Entrapment	23.57	17.821	150

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Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics of the sample. 150 young females were randomly chosen for collection of the data (from the Delhi NCR region of India). The table shows mean and Standard Deviation for Gaslighting, Self-blame and Entrapment scores.

**Table 2 Correlation between Gaslighting and Self-Blame among Young Females**

Variable	N	r	p
Gaslighting	150	0.677	Sig***
Self-Blame	150		

Table 2 represents Correlation showcasing a strong positive relationship between Gaslighting and Self-Blame among Young Females. ( $r = 0.677$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicates that higher experiences of Gaslighting are associated with increased levels of Self-Blame among Young Females.

**Table 3 Correlation between Gaslighting and Entrapment among Young Females**

Variable	N	r	p
Gaslighting	150	0.654	Sig***
Entrapment	150		

Table 3 represents Correlation showcasing a strong positive relationship between Gaslighting and Entrapment among Young Females. ( $r = 0.654$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicates that higher experiences of Gaslighting are associated with increased levels of Psychological Entrapment among Young Females.

**Table 4 Correlation between Self-Blame and Entrapment among Young Females**

Variable	N	r	p
Self-Blame	150	0.628	Sig***
Entrapment	150		

Table 4 represents Correlation showcasing a strong positive relationship between Self-Blame and Entrapment among Young Females. ( $r = 0.628$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicates that as levels of Self-Blame increases, the feeling of Psychological Entrapment also increases in Young Females.

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between gaslighting, self-blame and entrapment among young females. Specifically, it investigated how experiences of gaslighting are associated with tendencies toward self-blame and entrapment, whether self-blame itself contributes the feelings of entrapment. The primary objective was to assess the interrelationships between these three variables, and it was hypothesized that there was significant relationship between (1) gaslighting and self-blame, (2) gaslighting and entrapment, and (3) self-blame and entrapment among young females. The findings of the study supported all three hypotheses. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation revealed significant positive correlation between each pair of variables. In Table 2, Gaslighting was strongly and positively correlated with self-blame ( $\rho = .677$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating females between the age range of 18-30 who experienced high levels of Gaslighting also experienced higher levels of Self-Blame. In Table 3, Gaslighting was strongly positive related with Entrapment ( $\rho = .654$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating individuals who reported higher levels of

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gaslighting also experienced higher levels of psychological Entrapment. Additionally in Table 4, Self-blame was found to be significantly positively correlated with Entrapment ( $\rho = .628, p < .01$ ), suggesting that individuals who internalize blame are more likely to feel trapped in their circumstances. The sample consisted of 150 young females, and the results suggest that gaslighting plays a critical role in the development of self-directed negative cognitions and psychological distress. One possible explanation is that repeated experiences of gaslighting – where an individual is manipulated into questioning their perceptions, feelings and reality- lead to chronic self-doubt, which may manifest itself as self-blame. This internalization of blame may then foster a sense of entrapment, as individuals feel emotionally stuck, powerless and unable to change their situation. Previous literature also supports these findings. Studies have shown that gaslighting contribute to cognitive distortions and emotional suppression, leading to long-term psychological harm (Sweet,2019). Self-blame has been linked with various forms of emotional distress like depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness (Tangney et al., 2007). Moreover, research has demonstrated that feelings of entrapment are a common factor in several mental health issues, including stress, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Taylor et al., 2011; Höller et al., 2022). There may be several contributing factors to observed associations. For instance, cultural and gender norms in many societies may socialize young females to take responsibility for interpersonal conflict, leading to greater tendency to blame themselves in abusive and manipulative relationships. These societal expectations, combined with a lack of awareness or access to support systems, can increase vulnerability to emotional manipulation and worsen the feelings of entrapment. It is essential to understand the psychological mechanism underlying these relationships. It is possible that gaslighting induces a sense of helplessness and reduces self-efficacy, which may in turn foster both self-blame and entrapment. Further exploration into mediating variables such as low self-esteem, learned helplessness, and trauma history could deepen our understanding of how these patterns develop and are maintained over time.

### *Implications and Limitations*

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on gaslighting and its psychological consequences, particularly among young females. By identifying strong links between gaslighting, self-blame and entrapment, this research highlights the urgent need for preventative and intervention strategies. Mental health professionals should be trained to recognize the subtle but harmful effects of gaslighting and address self-blaming tendencies in therapy. Educational institutions and policymakers can also play a role by raising awareness about psychological manipulation and empowering young females to recognize unhealthy dynamics. Ultimately, a greater understanding of these interconnected variables can guide the development of targeted mental health interventions aimed reducing the emotional harm and psychological resilience in vulnerable populations.

The sample is limited to young females, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other genders and age groups. The use of cross-sectional design also limits the ability to establish causal relationships among gaslighting, self-blame, and entrapment, as it only provides a snapshot of these at one point in time. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may have introduced biases such as social desirability and inaccurate self-perception, especially given the sensitive nature of the topics explored. The cultural context may also have had a significant impact on response of the participants and hence the findings may not fit within the context of other cultures. The absence of qualitative data means that the study could not capture the nuanced, lived experiences of participants, which may have added depth to the findings. The study did not control for potential confounding

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variables such as trauma history, current mental health conditions or family dynamics, which may have influenced the observed relationships among the variables.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to find the interrelationship between gaslighting, self-blame and feelings of entrapment among young females. The sample consists of young females aged 18- 30. The gaslighting of the participants was measured through Victim Gaslighting Questionnaire (VGQ), levels of self-blame were measured by Self-Blame Scale by Yashwi Reddy was used and the levels of psychological entrapment were measured by The Entrapment Scale which is developed by Allan and Gilbert. For statistical analysis Spearman Rank Order Correlation was used. The objective of the study was to find the relationship between Gaslighting, Self-Blame and Entrapment among young females. Findings revealed a positive significant relationship between Gaslighting and Self-Blame among young females was found, positive significant relationship between Gaslighting and Entrapment among young females was found and a Positive significant relationship between Self-Blame and Entrapment among young females was found.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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