

# SUBTLE MANIFESTATIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT: FROM GASLIGHTING TO EXCLUSION AND OTHER FORMS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL MANIPULATION

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in organizational environments, focusing on mechanisms such as gaslighting, social exclusion, and broader forms of psychosocial manipulation. Unlike overtly aggressive behaviors, these practices are often covert, ambiguous, and therefore challenging to detect, report, or sanction. However, their cumulative impact is substantial, leading to adverse outcomes at both the individual and collective level. Employees exposed to such dynamics may experience heightened stress, anxiety, and diminished psychological well-being, while organizations face erosion of interpersonal trust, weakening of social capital, and deterioration of the organizational climate.

The analysis emphasizes that these practices are not limited to individual interactions between colleagues or leaders and subordinates, but may also be embedded within organizational structures, cultures, and power relations. Gaslighting, for instance, undermines employees' confidence in their own perceptions and judgments, while social exclusion marginalizes individuals, depriving them of meaningful participation in group processes. Such mechanisms perpetuate asymmetric power dynamics and silence dissenting voices, ultimately undermining organizational integrity and performance.

In response, the paper advocates for the development of comprehensive institutional strategies that address psychological abuse beyond its overt manifestations. Preventive measures, recognition protocols, and intervention policies grounded in ethical principles are identified as essential for fostering organizational resilience and sustainability. By cultivating a respectful and inclusive environment, organizations can not only mitigate the risks associated with psychosocial manipulation but also enhance employee well-being, strengthen collective trust, and improve overall effectiveness.

**Keywords:** organizational psychological abuse, gaslighting, social exclusion, psychosocial manipulation, organizational climate, prevention and intervention policies.

**JEL Classification:** M12, M14, J28, I12

## **1 Introduction**

In recent decades, interest in psychological health and organizational climate has grown significantly, amid the recognition that the performance and sustainability of an organization directly depend on the well-being of its employees. Beyond the obvious forms of verbal or physical aggression, more and more studies highlight the existence of subtle forms of psychological abuse, difficult to identify and sanction, but with profound effects on the emotional and professional balance of individuals.

These behaviors, often manifested under the appearance of normal work relationships, include gaslighting, social marginalization, professional isolation, constant invalidation or subtle undermining of competence. They contribute to the erosion of self-esteem, increased occupational stress and diminished team cohesion. Unlike direct forms of mobbing or harassment, subtle psychological abuse is characterized by intentional ambiguity and a relational dynamic that is difficult to demonstrate, which makes it all the more dangerous.

In the contemporary organizational context, marked by performance pressures, internal competition and rapid transformations, these manifestations can be normalized or even institutionalized by the organizational culture itself. Therefore, a careful analysis of these forms of abuse — from the psychosocial mechanisms involved to the effects on the individual and the organization — becomes essential for understanding and preventing relational dysfunctions and the degradation of the work climate. The purpose of this article is to explore the subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment, focusing on concepts such as gaslighting, social exclusion and other forms of psychosocial manipulation. It also aims to identify the psychological and contextual mechanisms that facilitate the emergence of these behaviors, as well as their implications for mental health and professional performance.

## **2 Organizational psychological abuse**

**Organizational psychological abuse** refers to repetitive behaviors, attitudes, or practices within an organization that negatively affect the psychological, emotional, or professional well-being of employees.

This can include harassment, intimidation, undermining self-confidence, social isolation, overwork/excessive workload, or creating a hostile work environment, which is not limited to isolated acts, but rather a systematic pattern.

**Organizational psychological abuse** represents a set of deliberate or repetitive actions or behaviors within an organization that aim to undermine the self-esteem, mental health, or professional performance of employees, creating a hostile and harmful work environment (Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L., 2011). These behaviors are distinct from ordinary conflicts due to their persistent, systematic nature and the imbalance between the power exercised and the employee's vulnerability.

Psychological abuse in the organizational environment (also called mobbing or organizational bullying) is not always evident. It sometimes manifests through small behaviors, a series of subtle, constant manifestations that are difficult to notice at first glance, but which consistently undermine a person's confidence and autonomy, and are extremely damaging to both the employee and the organizational climate. Psychological abuse in the workplace, often called mobbing or psychological harassment, is often manifested through subtle and insidious behaviors that are repeated over time and are difficult to identify in the early stages (Leymann, H., 1996). These manifestations create a toxic work environment and aim to undermine, isolate and demoralize the employee.

Here are some of the most subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment:

- Gaslighting
- Passive-aggressive communication: Mixed messages: “You did well, but... you know there’s always room for improvement.” Compliments with an ironic tone.
- Social isolation: Exclusion from meetings or informal activities. Ignoring a person’s contributions or presence.
- Undermining competence: Constant criticism, even for minor things. Intentionally impossible tasks or lack of resources. Minimizing achievements.
- Excessive control and micro-management: Obsessive checking, lack of autonomy. Imposing unrealistic deadlines.
- Intentional ambiguity: Unclear instructions, changing rules without warning. “Moving targets”: standards change at the whim of the superior.
- Emotional manipulation: Inducing feelings of guilt: “If you don’t do this, the team suffers because of you.” Veiled threats: “I don’t want you to cause trouble... but you better do as I say.”

**Early Signs of Subtle Psychological Abuse in Organizations.** Subtle psychological abuse is insidious precisely because its early signs are easy to ignore or attribute to other causes (such as

"the stress of the moment" or "a bad day"). Recognizing these early signs is crucial to stopping the escalation of abusive behavior.

Early signs of subtle psychological abuse include:

1. *Passive-aggressive communication*: • Ironic comments or jokes with negative connotations. • Frequent criticism, but disguised as “advice” or “constructive remarks”. • Messages or emails that convey tension or subtle reproaches.

2. *Isolation and exclusion*: • Excluding employees from meetings, decisions, or team activities without clear reasons. • Avoiding eye contact or direct interactions. • Lack of access to information essential to completing tasks.

3. *Emotional manipulation*: • Creating feelings of guilt or shame for minor mistakes. • Unrealistic promises or constantly changing expectations. • Subtle pressure to do things “outside of official responsibilities”.

4. *Constant criticism and lack of recognition*: • Ignoring employees’ achievements or minimizing their contributions. • Excessive emphasis on small mistakes, ignoring progress or effort. • Constant comparison with colleagues to induce feelings of inferiority.

5. *Digital signals*: • Ambiguous or demeaning messages on internal platforms. • Repeatedly unclear or contradictory feedback.

6. *Behavioral signs in victims*: • Decreased motivation and involvement in activities. • Social withdrawal or avoidance of interactions with certain people. • Increased absenteeism or time spent “outside the office”. • Visible stress, irritability or unexplained mood swings. • Blocking or ignoring important professional communications.

7. *Tense organizational climate*: • Frequent conflicts between teams or individuals. • Lack of collaboration and trust between employees. • Repeated gossip or gossip that affects morale.

### **3 Communication styles and psychological abuse**

The manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment are closely related to the way the aggressor uses and distorts different communication styles to manipulate, undermine and control the victim. Here is an analysis of how the main communication styles can be used to exercise subtle psychological abuse:

**Aggressive style** (attacking attitude) - the tendency to always be in front, to have the last word, to impose oneself at any cost, even at the cost of hurting and upsetting other people. In order to dominate, any means seem to be usable - intimidation, contradiction, humiliation, compromising others, shocking attitudes and behaviors, revenge, assuming excessive risks. This attitude stimulates aggression and antipathy from partners and has the effect for the person in question of feeling not loved, respected and appreciated, facts that make him even more aggressive - a true vicious circle of aggression is created.

The connection between the aggressive communication style and the subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment is a very close one, because both describe ways in which work relationships can become toxic, even if there is not always direct and obvious violence.

Subtle manifestations of organizational psychological abuse may be disguised as “constructive feedback” or “firm management style,” but in reality include:

Verbal microaggressions: ironic remarks, derogatory jokes, passive-aggressive comments.

Isolation: ignoring someone’s ideas, excluding them from discussions or meetings.

Disproportionate delegation: intentionally assigning impossible or unnecessary tasks.

Devaluation: constant negative feedback, comparing yourself to others to induce guilt or inferiority.

Excessive control: frequent checking, lack of autonomy, insinuation that the employee is not capable.

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Aggressive communication style is one of the main forms through which psychological abuse manifests itself in organizations (Table 1).

**Table 2. The link between aggressive communication style and subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment**

Appearance	Aggressive communication style	Subtle manifestations of organizational psychological abuse	The connection between them
<b>Way of expression</b>	Raised tone, interruptions, direct criticism, harsh language.	Irony, sarcasm, derogatory remarks disguised as "jokes".	Aggression can be expressed directly or subtly, but the effect is similar: reducing the dignity of the interlocutor.
<b>Attitude towards the other</b>	Dominance, disrespect, imposing your own opinion.	Ignoring, minimizing, excluding from discussions.	Direct or passive aggression sends the same message: "you don't matter."
<b>Feedback</b>	Harsh criticism, negative generalizations (“you never do well”).	Constant negative feedback, humiliating comparisons, lack of recognition.	Aggressive communication is often “camouflaged” as feedback, becoming a form of subtle abuse.
<b>Impact on relationships</b>	It creates visible tensions and open conflicts.	It creates latent tensions, distrust, alienation.	Both undermine collaboration and organizational climate.
<b>Emotional consequences</b>	Fear, shame, anger, defensiveness.	Insecurity, anxiety, low self-esteem, burnout.	The psychological effects are cumulative and can become traumatic.
<b>Durability</b>	It's easy to notice and punish if it's constant.	Hard to identify because it's masked in "normal" behaviors.	Repeated and subtle aggression turns into systematic psychological abuse.

Source: Developed by the author

Psychological abuse often uses verbal or nonverbal aggression (tone, gestures, threatening looks) to control, intimidate or reduce the self-esteem of employees. Even when it is not explicit, aggressive communication can take the form of subtle manifestations, such as repeated irony, ridicule in meetings or undermining credibility. Ultimately, this combination generates toxic organizational climate, increased stress, burnout and decreased performance.

Aggressive communication style is the vehicle through which many of the subtle manifestations of psychological abuse in organizations are expressed. Aggressive communication style is one of the visible forms of psychological abuse, and when it is subtle, it becomes more difficult to sanction and more dangerous for the organizational climate.

**Manipulatory style** (manipulation attitude) - preference for a backstage role, tendency to wait for the right moment to come to light and put oneself in value, tendency to look for hidden intentions behind any statements of others. The person avoids saying openly what he thinks, changes his opinions according to those of the interlocutor, likes to be around the big and powerful (as a compensation for his own weaknesses) hoping to obtain benefits from his proximity to them. It is a way of interaction in which the person seeks to achieve his personal goals by indirectly influencing others, often through hidden or unbalanced power strategies.

People in this category seek for others to do what they would like, but this does not involve open confrontations; it is rather a matter of waiting for the situation to turn in their favor. Often these people "play roles" in various ways, as a sign of insufficient social maturity, this also appears in connection with a weak, precarious, unsatisfactory social status. The problem of manipulative individuals is to hide their weakness, not to be discovered because they too fear the judgment of others and not to be marginalized.

*The connection between the manipulative style and subtle psychological abuse:*

Manipulative style - the basis of subtle abuse: Manipulation is a tool of control: the person communicates indirectly, induces guilt or fear and achieves their goals without being transparent.

Subtle abuse = manipulation applied repetitively and contextually: In the organizational environment, manipulation is not only between two people, but can be systematic: bosses → subordinates, colleagues → colleagues, group → individual. It becomes subtle abuse when these techniques lead to the devaluation and psychological control of the victim.

Common element: hidden intention: Both forms avoid direct confrontation. The apparently neutral or "funny" message hides a strategy of control and undermining.

Difference in intensity: Manipulation can also occur in occasional interactions, without lasting effects. Subtle abuse occurs when manipulation becomes a constant pattern, generating stress, marginalization and a toxic climate.

Simplified image: Manipulation = tool (communication strategy with hidden intention). Subtle abuse = repeated use of this tool to maintain power and weaken the psychological resistance of another.

#### **4 Manifestations of psychological abuse in the organizational environment**

##### **4.1 Gaslighting**

The 1938 play *Gas Light*, along with its 1944 film adaptation, is the origin of the term due to the systematic psychological manipulation of the main character on a victim. In the film, a husband tries to convince his wife that she is mentally unstable by manipulating minor elements of her environment, constantly insisting that she is wrong, that she does not remember things correctly when she mentions them.

Essentially, gaslighting is a situation of interaction between a "manipulator" and his "victim", in which the gaslighter asserts that the victim is incapable of correctly understanding reality, that is, is epistemically incompetent (Speer, J. (2021)). The gaslighter accomplishes this through various tactics: most often through direct accusations of epistemic incompetence, such as declaring the victim "crazy", or claiming that the victim is imagining things that are not actually happening, other forms, such as when the gaslighter asserts that the victim's identity, whether related to race, gender, or professional experience, prevents them from taking their perspective on certain realities or current events seriously. This form of gaslighting is most often observed in organizational environments and is characteristic of an authoritarian management style.

*Gaslighting and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)*

Cognitive dissonance (Leon Festinger, 1957) is the theory that people tend to seek coherence between beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. When a discrepancy (cognitive dissonance) occurs, the individual experiences psychological discomfort.

Festinger described the universal mechanism of cognitive dissonance and its reduction. To reduce this discomfort, the person: changes beliefs, or changes behaviors, or justifies the situation through rationalizations.

Gaslighting and the connection with cognitive dissonance:

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation through which the aggressor makes the victim question their perceptions, memories, or judgment. This technique exploits the mechanisms of cognitive dissonance reduction. How it works:

- The victim perceives reality in a certain way - but the aggressor insists that it is wrong.

- Cognitive dissonance appears between what the victim knows (“I saw/heard this”) and what they are constantly told (“It seems to you, you are making it up, you are exaggerating”).
- To reduce the tension, the victim begins to modify their beliefs (“Maybe I really was wrong, maybe I am imagining it”).
- Over time, this process undermines the victim’s self-confidence and makes them increasingly dependent on the aggressor to define “the correct reality”.

Gaslighting uses this mechanism abusively: the aggressor intentionally creates dissonance and then steers the victim towards a solution that serves his or her interests (acceptance of the imposed version of reality).

A central feature of gaslighting is the aggressor's attempt to convince the victim that he or she is epistemically incompetent. This means that the victim is unable to understand some (or all) aspects of reality (including potentially some aspects of themselves).

A second key feature of gaslighting is that the victim herself believes that the gaslighter is epistemically trustworthy, allowing the gaslighter to gain the epistemic leverage necessary to further manipulate the target. Epistemic leverage can be influenced by a number of factors, including (1) differential power relations within the relationship, financial, structural, and/or emotional dependency, (2) the intensity of the emotional connection, and/or (3) the victim’s internalization of socially established stereotypes.

This leverage is used by the abuser to induce doubt in the victim’s ability to accurately understand reality.

Essentially, the victim believes that the gaslighter is a more accurate interpreter of reality, allowing them to accept and internalize the gaslighter’s view of themselves as epistemically incompetent. Once this perspective is internalized, the gaslighter can easily control them.

The final key characteristic of gaslighting is that manipulating the victim’s behavior benefits the gaslighter. This may be due to material gain (appropriating the victim's possessions) or non-material gain, such as the desire to dominate the person affected by gaslighting or to avoid responsibility for their actions.

#### **4.2 Social exclusion**

Social exclusion in organizations is a phenomenon that occurs when an individual or a group of people is marginalized, ignored, or isolated from the rest of the collective, intentionally or unintentionally. (Williams, K. D., 2007)

*Exclusion and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)*

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) shows that belonging to a group confers prestige and psychological resources. When someone is excluded, they not only lose access to information, but also part of their professional identity.

Forms of social exclusion in organizations:

Interpersonal isolation - colleagues avoid interactions with a person, do not include them in conversations or activities. Professional ostracism - the person is excluded from relevant projects, meetings, or decision-making processes.

Labeling and stigmatization - an individual is treated differently because of some characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social status, sexual orientation, etc.).

Neglect of contributions - a person's ideas and work are not recognized or are ignored.

Informal exclusion – lack of inclusion in support networks and social relationships in the organization (breaks, social events, informal groups).

Consequences at the individual level: stress, anxiety, decreased job satisfaction, decreased motivation, burnout, intention to leave the organization. Consequences at the organizational level: decreased team cohesion, increased conflicts, reduced innovation and productivity, damaged organizational image.

#### **4.3 Manipulation through social norms**

Another subtle form of abuse is psychosocial manipulation through the appeal to social norms and influence. Robert Cialdini (Robert Cialdini, 2001) identified six fundamental principles of persuasion: reciprocity, consistency, social proof, authority, likeability, and scarcity. In organizations, these principles can be misused. For example: "If you refuse to participate in this unpaid project, your colleagues will think you are not loyal to the team." Here we have the normative pressure of the group and manipulation through social proof.

#### **4.4 Subtle Humiliation and Social Drama**

Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959) described social interactions as a play, in which everyone plays their part. In organizations, controlling public image can become a tool of manipulation. For example: a coordinator publicly praises the team, but completely ignores the contribution of a member. This is not direct criticism, but it is humiliation by omission, an “act on stage” that conveys to the group who is and who is not valued.

#### **4.5 Competence undermining**

Competence undermining is a form of subtle abuse in organizations in which someone (colleague, manager, client) repeatedly diminishes, relaxes, or questions the professional capabilities of another person — without overt or violent attacks. It is behavior that erodes the reputation, authority, and trust of the victim in an often ambiguous way, difficult to prove and directly confront. Competence undermining is often indirect, often social (exclusion, diminution), and aims to weaken a person’s professional position.

#### **5 Behavioral strategies**

*What you can do as an individual (practical strategies)*

- Document: date, what was said/done, witnesses, evidence (emails, minutes).
- Use assertive responses (short, neutral).
- Ask for concrete feedback: “What exactly do you think should be improved in this deliverable?” (you get objective criteria)
- Alliances: seek support from colleagues, mentors or internal sponsors.
- Planned escalation: talk to your direct manager (without attacks), then with HR if it doesn’t get fixed.
- Protect your reputation publicly: document contributions in reports, emails, and project updates.

*What the organization can do:*

- Clear anti-harassment policies that include subtle behaviors and safe reporting mechanisms.
- Training for leaders on recognizing microaggressions and how to manage conflicts.
- 360° feedback process and assessments that penalize undermining behaviors.
- Modeling through leaders: transparency in attributing merit, promoting a culture of credit-sharing (sharing recognition for success among all those involved, not just to leaders or visible people.).
- Remedial mechanisms: mediation, coaching, proportional disciplinary sanctions.
- Continuous measurement: annual climate surveys, retention indicators and wellbeing (general health, balance, and satisfaction of employees – both physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially).
- Creating confidential reporting mechanisms so that victims do not fear retaliation.
- Cultivating an inclusive organizational culture, in which validation and recognition are central principles.

#### **6 Conclusion**

Early detection of subtle forms of psychological abuse in organizations is not only an ethical but also a strategic issue, essential for maintaining a healthy and productive work environment.

Social psychology provides us with essential concepts to understand subtle abuse: from cognitive dissonance and social identity, to normative influence and the dramaturgy of interactions. Only by recognizing these dynamics can we build healthy organizations, in which each member is valued not only formally, but also psychosocially.

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