

Fractured Selves: A Conceptual Model of Verbal Abuse, Gaslighting, and the Erosion of Self-Concept Clarity and Decision Making in Adults

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Abstract: *Verbal abuse and gaslighting are pervasive but often invisible forms of psychological maltreatment that reshape how individuals come to know and trust themselves, yet existing scholarship on their psychological consequences remains fragmented across disciplines and constructs. This paper presents a conceptual, theory-building synthesis that addresses that fragmentation. Drawing on four foundational psychological theories (Self-Concept Clarity Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Learned Helplessness Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory), three original, interlinked conceptual models are developed: the Gaslighting-Induced Epistemic Erosion (GIEE) Model, the Self-Concept Fracture Spiral (SCFS), and the Cognitive Autonomy Recovery Framework (CARF). Together, the models reframe gaslighting as an epistemic injury and offer an integrated, testable account of how psychological abuse erodes self-concept clarity and decisional autonomy, and how that erosion may be reversed.*

Keywords: gaslighting, verbal abuse, self-concept clarity, decision making, epistemic injury, conceptual model, psychological recovery

1. Introduction

Verbal abuse and gaslighting are increasingly recognized as pervasive, but often invisible, forms of psychological maltreatment that shape how individuals come to know and trust themselves. Verbal abuse involves repeated exposure to criticism, humiliation, and hostile communication that gradually undermines self-worth (Evans, 1996), while gaslighting operates more covertly, systematically distorting a person's perception of reality until the person begins to question their own memory, judgment, and emotional responses (Stern, 2007).

At the center of this injury lies self-concept clarity: the extent to which a person's self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and stable across time and context (Campbell et al., 1996). When self-concept clarity erodes, decision making tends to follow it downward. Individuals exposed to sustained psychological manipulation frequently describe indecisiveness, chronic self-doubt, and a growing dependence on external validation, patterns consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975).

This paper adopts a fully conceptual, theory-building approach rather than a primary-data study. It synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical literature into three original conceptual models that theorize the psychological mechanisms through which verbal abuse and gaslighting reshape identity and cognition, reflecting the established tradition of conceptual, non-empirical scholarship (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011).

Psychological abuse remains underexplored relative to physical abuse, in part because it leaves no visible mark and is easily normalized within relationships (Sweet, 2019). Four gaps justify this approach: gaslighting and verbal abuse are typically studied as separate constructs; self-concept clarity is routinely conflated with self-esteem; decision making is treated as a secondary, inferred outcome; and no existing

framework integrates exposure, cognitive disruption, and behavioral consequence into a single explanatory process. The purpose of this paper is to develop an original, theoretically grounded account of how verbal abuse and gaslighting reshape self-concept clarity and decision making in adults, within an Indian, collectivist cultural context, and how this erosion may be reversed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Verbal Abuse and Gaslighting

Evans (1996) offered one of the earliest sustained conceptual accounts of verbal abuse, distinguishing it from isolated conflict by its repetition, its covert function of control, and its tendency to be minimized by the abusing partner when confronted. Arora (2024) extended this account empirically, demonstrating that repeated emotional and psychological abuse contributes to the internalization of negative self-beliefs.

Stern (2007) provided the most widely cited clinical account of gaslighting, describing a pattern in which one person systematically denies, contradicts, or reframes another's direct experience until the recipient distrusts their own perception. Empirically, Sengkey and Illahibaccus-Sona (2024) found that women affected by gaslighting in romantic relationships reported confusion, dependency, avoidance of conflict, and diminished trust in their own judgment, while Shekhar and Tripathi (2024) found that greater exposure to gaslighting was associated with heightened anxiety and lower self-esteem among young adults.

2.2 Self-Concept Clarity as a Structural Construct

Campbell et al. (1996) developed self-concept clarity as a construct distinct from self-esteem: the degree to which self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and stable across time, independent of their valence. Existing gaslighting literature has tended to conflate self-concept

clarity with self-esteem, yet gaslighting, by design, targets the structural dimension: its function is not primarily to make the recipient feel bad about themselves, but to make them unsure of what they know about themselves.

2.3 Cognitive Dissonance, Learned Helplessness, and Self-Efficacy

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance holds that contradictory cognitions produce discomfort that motivates resolution, typically by revising one belief to restore consistency. When a person's direct perception conflicts with an abuser's confident, repeated denial, the dissonance can be resolved by maintaining confidence in one's own perception or by revising it; the latter becomes more likely as relational stakes and contradiction frequency rise (Stern, 2007). Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness describes the passivity and reduced initiative that follow repeated exposure to uncontrollable negative events. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory holds that self-efficacy beliefs are shaped through direct experience, observation, and verbal persuasion, and can be rebuilt through structured positive feedback and mastery experience, providing the theoretical bridge to a recovery-oriented model.

2.4 Decision Making Under Psychological Threat

Existing gaslighting literature has treated decision-making difficulty as an inferred secondary symptom rather than a phenomenon meriting direct attention. Baumeister et al. (1998) demonstrated that self-regulation and choice draw on a limited resource depleted with repeated use, and Higgins (1987) showed that discrepancies between actual self-concept and internalized standards generate anxious, vigilant self-monitoring.

2.5 Trauma, Betrayal, and Cross-Cultural Considerations

Because gaslighting typically occurs within relationships the recipient depends on, the broader trauma literature is relevant. Herman (1992) proposed a phase-based, non-linear model of trauma recovery, while Freyd's (1996) betrayal trauma theory proposes that trauma perpetrated by a person the victim depends on produces an adaptive unawareness of the betrayal, because full awareness would threaten the attachment relationship. Sweet (2019) further observed that existing scholarship has been developed predominantly within Western, individualist contexts, assumptions that do not transfer neutrally to collectivist contexts, including much of Indian society, where deference to family or partner authority

is often normatively expected rather than a sign of impaired autonomy. No existing account integrates these consequences into a single explanatory process: the gap this paper addresses.

3. Conceptual Research Methodology

This paper adopts a fully conceptual, non-empirical research design, constructing original theoretical models through the systematic synthesis, integration, and extension of existing theoretical and empirical literature (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Three considerations justify this design: the ethical and practical risk of re-traumatization associated with direct primary data collection; the fragmented state of existing empirical literature; and the suitability of model-building research for producing clinically usable output.

Following Jaakkola's (2020) typology, this work is best characterized as a hybrid of theory synthesis and model development, integrating four established psychological theories into three original conceptual models, synthesized narratively rather than through a formal systematic review protocol.

The three models were developed through a four-step iterative procedure: construct identification; theoretical grounding; integration logic; and iterative refinement. Each model was evaluated against Whetten's (1989) criteria for theoretical contribution and against MacInnis's (2011) criteria of parsimony, novelty, and utility.

4. Theoretical Integration and Conceptual Models

The four foundational theories reviewed above each explain a distinct facet of psychological abuse, but none individually explains the full process by which abuse becomes entrenched, or how that process might be reversed. This section integrates them into three original, interlinked conceptual models: GIEE addresses mechanism; SCFS addresses entrapment; and CARF addresses reversal.

4.1 Model 1: The Gaslighting-Induced Epistemic Erosion (GIEE) Model

The GIEE Model theorizes the mechanism by which gaslighting converts external manipulation into internal self-doubt across five sequential stages, with a feedback loop connecting the final stage back to the first.

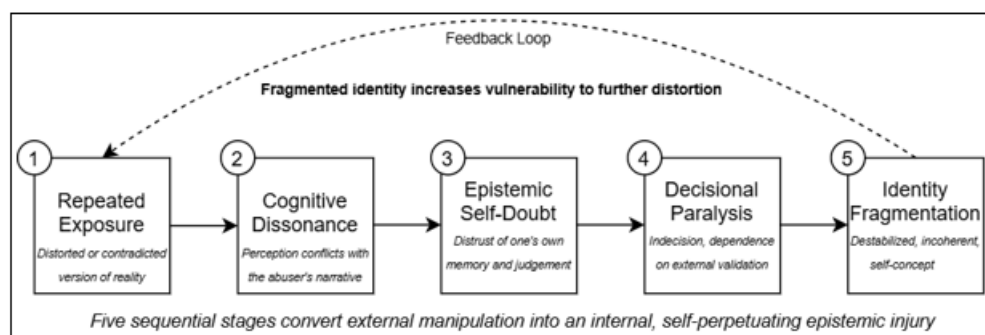


Figure 1: The GIEE Model: five sequential stages and the feedback loop by which identity fragmentation increases vulnerability to further distortion.

In Stage 1 (Repeated Exposure), the individual is repeatedly exposed to a version of events that contradicts their direct perception, memory, or emotional response; the critical feature is repetition within an emotionally significant relationship. In Stage 2 (Cognitive Dissonance), this contradiction produces the psychological discomfort described by Festinger (1957). In Stage 3 (Epistemic Self-Doubt), the individual increasingly resolves the conflict by distrusting their own memory and judgment rather than the abuser's account. In Stage 4 (Decisional Paralysis), consistent with learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975), the expectation that one's own judgment cannot be trusted extends into everyday decision making, producing indecision and dependence on external validation. In Stage 5 (Identity Fragmentation), the cumulative effect destabilizes self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996): self-beliefs become less clearly defined, less internally consistent, and less stable across time and context.

A defining feature of the model is the feedback loop running from Stage 5 back to Stage 1: a fragmented, unclear self-concept is theorized to be more vulnerable to further distortion. The model's central contribution is its reframing of gaslighting not merely as an emotional stressor but as an epistemic injury: damage to a person's basic capacity to know what they know.

4.2 Model 2: The Self-Concept Fracture Spiral (SCFS)

Where the GIEE Model maps a mechanism, the SCFS Model addresses why survivors so often remain entrapped. The model depicts self-concept erosion as a descending spiral rather than a straight line, in which each successive cycle of manipulation narrows confidence in one's own perception, which in turn increases reliance on the abuser as an external anchor of reality.

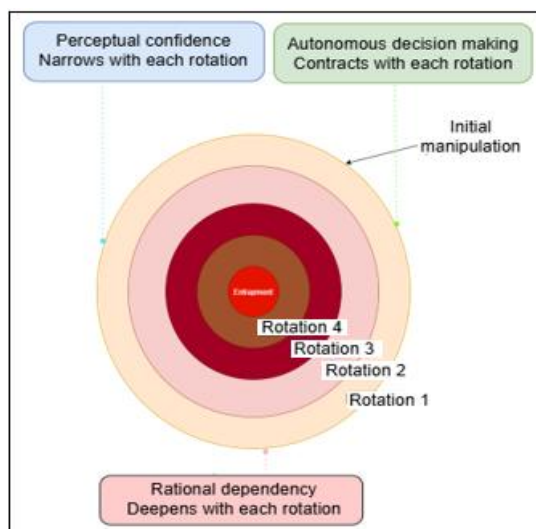


Figure 2: The Self-Concept Fracture Spiral (SCFS): three concentric bands contracting simultaneously with each rotation toward a center of relational and epistemic entrapment.

The spiral is organized around three simultaneously contracting bands. Perceptual Confidence represents trust in one's own memory, judgment, and interpretation of events. Relational Dependency represents reliance on the abuser as

the primary source of validation for what is real (Freyd, 1996). Autonomous Decision Making represents willingness and perceived capacity to act on independent judgment (Seligman, 1975).

The spiral, rather than linear, structure is the model's central theoretical contribution. A linear model implies a survivor need only recognize the harm at any point to exit the process; the spiral form instead formalizes why recognition alone is frequently insufficient, because each rotation has already narrowed perceptual confidence and deepened relational dependency (Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024).

4.3 Model 3: The Cognitive Autonomy Recovery Framework (CARF)

The CARF Model inverts the logic of the SCFS spiral, offering a strengths-based recovery framework that targets the same structural pathway responsible for the original erosion. It proposes four phases, represented as a recursive cycle rather than a fixed linear staircase, reflecting Herman's (1992) observation that recovery from relational trauma is rarely strictly sequential.

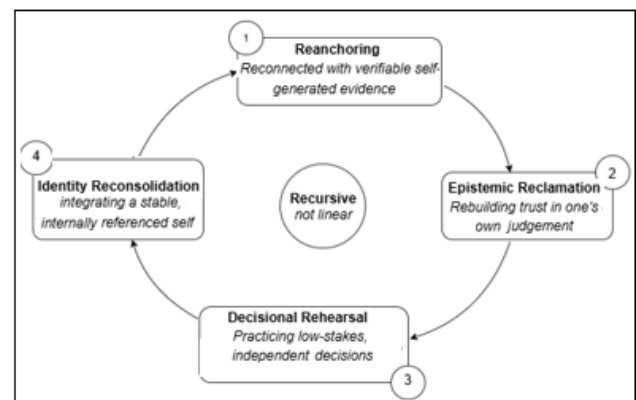


Figure 3: The Cognitive Autonomy Recovery Framework (CARF): four recursive phases targeting the same structural pathway mapped by the GIEE and SCFS models.

In Phase 1 (Reanchoring), the individual reconnects with verifiable, self-generated evidence of their own perceptions and history that exists independently of the abuser's narrative. In Phase 2 (Epistemic Reclamation), the individual engages in guided reflection aimed at rebuilding trust in their own judgment. In Phase 3 (Decisional Rehearsal), the individual practices low-stakes independent decisions, applying the mastery-experience mechanism Bandura (1986) identified as a primary route to rebuilding self-efficacy. In Phase 4 (Identity Reconsolidation), the individual integrates the gains of the preceding phases into a more stable, internally referenced self-concept, consistent with Campbell et al.'s (1996) definition of self-concept clarity.

Unlike a fixed staircase model, CARF explicitly allows phases to be revisited out of sequence; a setback in a high-stakes decision, for instance, might require a temporary return to Decisional Rehearsal. The model is a structural complement to, not a replacement for, established trauma-informed therapeutic modalities.

4.4 The Unified Meta-Model and Propositions for Future Testing

Considered together, the three models form a single, internally consistent theoretical account. The GIEE Model specifies the sequential mechanism by which gaslighting propagates from external contradiction to internal identity fragmentation. The SCFS Model specifies why this mechanism, repeated across cycles, produces structural entrapment. The CARF Model specifies how the same three underlying dimensions (epistemic confidence, relational dependency, and decisional autonomy) can be deliberately rebuilt.

This paper does not test the following propositions empirically but formulates them for future research: (P1) the frequency and relational proximity of contradictory feedback will positively predict the rate of progression through the five GIEE stages; (P2) identity fragmentation will be associated with increased vulnerability to subsequent gaslighting; (P3) the three SCFS bands will show a compounding, not additive, pattern of change across repeated cycles; (P4) difficulty exiting an abusive relationship will be predicted more strongly by relational dependency and perceptual confidence than by stated recognition of harm; (P5) structured Reanchoring and Epistemic Reclamation will be associated with increased decisional confidence prior to any direct decision-making intervention; and (P6) recovery trajectories following the CARF sequence will show a non-linear, recursive pattern.

5. Discussion

This synthesis makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, the GIEE Model offers an explicit, sequential account of gaslighting as an epistemic injury, suggesting that interventions targeting mood or self-esteem alone may leave the underlying epistemic injury unaddressed. Second, the SCFS Model offers a structural account of why survivors remain entrapped. Third, the CARF Model offers a recovery framework explicitly derived from, and structurally mirroring, the same mechanism responsible for the original erosion.

The models converge closely with existing empirical findings by design: Sengkey and Illahibaccus-Sona's (2024) qualitative findings map directly onto Stages 3 and 4 of GIEE and onto all three SCFS bands.

6. Implications

Clinically, the GIEE Model suggests that clinicians working with survivors of gaslighting should assess epistemic confidence (trust in one's own memory and judgment) as a distinct target separate from mood and self-esteem. The SCFS Model suggests that a client's difficulty leaving an abusive relationship should be understood not as a motivational or insight deficit, but as a structural consequence of compounding epistemic and relational dependency.

At the policy level, this synthesis may inform the recognition of psychological and emotional abuse within domestic violence and workplace harassment frameworks, which in

many jurisdictions remain oriented primarily toward physical or documentable harm. Within the Indian legal and policy context specifically, operational definitions for nonphysical abuse remain comparatively underdeveloped; the GIEE Model could, following validation, contribute to more precise operational language.

Socially, articulating the mechanism of gaslighting in accessible, model-based terms may reduce the stigma and self-blame survivors often report. Cross-culturally, because collectivist contexts often normatively expect relational deference that could be superficially mistaken for the dependency described by SCFS, the models are constructed to distinguish internal confidence in one's own judgment from its culturally variable outward expression (Sweet, 2019).

7. Limitations and Future Research

As a fully conceptual contribution, the three models presented here are theoretical constructions, not empirically validated findings; they have not been tested against primary data from survivors, and their accuracy, completeness, and applicability to real cases remain to be established.

Four directions for future empirical research follow. First, longitudinal or mixed-methods testing of the GIEE, SCFS, and CARF models is needed to examine the causal sequencing proposed. Second, development and psychometric validation of a structured instrument based on the GIEE and SCFS models would allow the epistemic-injury reframing to be tested directly. Third, cross-cultural replication would allow the cross-cultural boundary conditions to be examined. Fourth, intervention research would provide the first direct test of the CARF Model's practical utility.

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to address a well-documented but poorly integrated gap in the psychological literature on gaslighting and verbal abuse: the absence of a unifying, theory-generating account of how these forms of psychological abuse reshape self-concept clarity and decision making, and how the resulting harm might be reversed. Three original, interlinked conceptual models were developed: GIEE theorizes the sequential mechanism by which external manipulation becomes internalized self-doubt; SCFS theorizes why this mechanism produces structural entrapment; and CARF theorizes how the same architecture can be deliberately reversed.

Considered together, these three models advance a central claim: that gaslighting is best understood not merely as an emotional stressor, but as an epistemic injury (a disruption of a person's basic capacity to know what they know) that compounds structurally over time and that can, in principle, be addressed through an intervention architecture mirroring the same structural pathway responsible for the original harm.

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