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### Corporate Gaslighting: Can Isolated Training Help? A Narrative Study

Jade Singleton

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CORPORATE GASLIGHTING: CAN ISOLATED TRAINING HELP?

A NARRATIVE STUDY

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the

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CORPORATE GASLIGHTING: CAN ISOLATED TRAINING HELP? A NARRATIVE STUDY, a Doctoral research project prepared by JADE SINGLETON in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this narrative study is to investigate whether isolated anti-corporate gaslighting training, leveraging vignettes, could be of value to organizations. Findings responded to three research questions: (1) How do participants identify when the vignette shifts into corporate gaslighting territory? (2) What perceptions do Learning & Development professionals have of the training experience? (3) What do participants believe the usefulness of this isolated training is for organizations like theirs? Study participants were three professionals across Learning & Development and Human Resource roles. After the anti-corporate gaslighting training session, administering vignette testing, and finally interviewing the group to gauge their perceptions of course efficacy; this training approach was found to be useful and effective. All participants were able to successfully identify corporate gaslighting was present following the learning session. In addition, each participant indicated that the isolated training would be useful within their respective work environments.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background**

Gaslighting behavior at work, or corporate gaslighting, is a psychologically abusive tactic deployed in the work environment (Sweet, 2019). This power dynamic derives its name from the 1939 play “Gas Light.” In this classic performance, a husband convinces his wife that she is delusional through suggesting she is visualizing delusions about the gaslight lamps on their street. Gaslighting aligns with its theatrical reference and is defined as a reality-shifting paradigm in which the victim is made to question his thoughts, memories, and events.

Significant research has addressed the harm caused by gaslighting, with many studies examining the dyadic, often familial implications of gaslighting. However, a gap exists in the literature regarding information centered on social gaslighting (Adkins, 2019). Social gaslighting occurs when the dynamic takes place in public spaces, such as the workplace.

This gap is evidenced by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC, 2021) report which cites retaliation, inclusive of gaslighting-style behavior, as the leading cause of claims, accounting for 55.8% of all reports (EEOC, 2021). These retaliation accusations surpass claims pertaining to sex, race, age, and disability. The EEOC (2021) specifies case examples that emphasize retaliation goes beyond direct actions such as firing, demotion, or transfer after reporting a workplace violation. The commission emphasizes that more subtle and discreet forms of retaliation, such as withholding information valuable for the employee to complete their duties, exclusion from team meetings, and making false accusations, are also classifiable as workplace gaslighting (EEOC, 2021).

Gaslighting does not solely exist within the retaliatory paradigm. It can be present across any employee relationship or role. Corporate gaslighting can result in long-lasting, negative psychological impacts. Psychologists affirm that corporate gaslighting can cause victims to develop “trauma-based mental injuries and adjustment disorders from being exposed to this form of psychological manipulation” (Neilson, 2019, Advice for Employers section, para. 7). They also highlight that corporate gaslighting negatively impacts entire teams and whole organizations. Moreover, they assert that this behavior can lead to disengagement, presenteeism, trust erosion, and employee turnover (Neilson, 2019). This assertion aligns with other research findings that examine impacts of psychological abuse in the workplace (Courcy et al., 2019).

### **Rationale**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) defines workplace violence as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, and verbal abuse” (Buckner et al., 2014, p. 257). Multiple studies have examined the correlation between workplace violence and training effectiveness combating such instances (Buckner et al., 2014). However, to date, no empirical studies conducted in the United States have investigated any outcomes related to anti-gaslighting training or its efficacy. This gap does not assert that no such training has occurred. There is simply lack of evidence substantiating such isolated, targeted learning experiences and application at the organizational level.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate whether focused employee training, leveraging aggregated pre-published material, would result in successful identification of corporate gaslighting behavior using vignettes. Vignettes are a sociological research tool that provide sketches of fictional vignettes and invite participants to imagine and then share

anticipated behavior (Jenkins et al., 2010). I am committed to leveraging the sociological approach to vignette development. This entails creating a snapshot vignette that unfolds in a brief series of stages (Jenkins et al., 2010).

This study measured learning transfer followed by isolated corporate gaslighting training. It also determined whether the approach and learning experience is considered effective based on feedback from Learning & Development professionals.

### **Research Questions**

Q1) How do participants identify when the vignette shifts into corporate gaslighting territory?

Q2) What perceptions do Learning & Development professionals have of the training experience?

Q3) What do participants believe the usefulness of this isolated training is for organizations like theirs?

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is the lack of sociological studies related to gaslighting behaviors (Adkins, 2019). This requires the use of adjacent studies such as those covering psychological abuse in the workplace. The number of participants is also a limitation. Due to the narrative analysis nature of this study, only three individuals took part in the study. The time it took to execute the narrative analysis and respective coding prohibited me from hosting more participants. For this reason, this study operates as a pilot and should serve to inform further investigations, explorations, and testing.

## Definition of Terms

- **Gaslighting** is defined as *manipulating someone by psychological means into questioning their own sanity.*
- **Social gaslighting** is defined as *gaslighting when played out in the public arena to keep the marginalized or disempowered individual or societal group in a weakened position.*
- **Psychological abuse** is defined as *subjection or exposure to behavior that may result in psychological trauma including anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is often associated with power imbalance in abusive relationships.*
- **Psychological safety** is defined as *being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career.*
- **A vignette** is defined as *a brief, evocative description, account, or episode.*
- **Interactive vignettes** are defined as *episodes that can be changed by the selection of the viewer, user, or respondent.*

## Conclusion

This study was designed to examine the efficacy of isolated training against corporate gaslighting behavior. It sought to unveil the subtle nuances that lead to inequities that are often felt—yet difficult to articulate. There is a literature gap around corporate gaslighting evidenced by the EEOC statistics and corporate struggles to create cultures of inclusiveness and psychological safety. This study may be used to increase awareness of corporate gaslighting, and more importantly, how to identify when it is occurring.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Several canonized themes were constructed throughout this study. Respective studies served as a grounding for key concepts referenced in this work. These concepts include corporate culture, toxic communication, corporate gaslighting, employee manipulation, organizational trainings, vignette use as a tool, and role of the trainer.

#### **Corporate Culture**

Researchers have used the construct of corporate or organizational culture to understand psychological phenomena in organizations. When examining corporate gaslighting and its impacts, it is important to understand that this harmful dynamic is not insulated. When this form of social gaslighting occurs, it impacts the proverbial walls of the pre-established corporate culture, either buckling or reinforcing its core foundations. Whether or not corporate gaslighting flourishes or is shunned by the organization is entirely dependent on its culture – which is based on the social ecosystem.

Ellinas et al. (2017) leveraged an empirical dataset to test social conformity plausibility within a large UK insurance firm. The researchers confirmed that peer pressure has a great impact on corporate culture at the organizational level and social rank has a stronger influence on the individual (Ellinas et al., 2017). They also noted that “increased social conformity can be increasingly damaging to the evolution of organizational culture” (Ellinas et al., 2017, p. 19). Further, Ellinas et al. (2017) acknowledged that flat organizations outperform vertical organizational structure in terms of “culture coherence and benefiting related processes, such as organizational learning” (p. 19). The researchers concluded that their findings aligned with heavily cited and widely accepted findings of previous research (Ellinas et al., 2017).

Gochhayat et al. (2017) examined data collected from 167 heads of engineering and management schools to test whether strong or weak organizational culture could be used to predict organizational effectiveness (Gochhayat et al., 2017). They found that organizations with strong cultures experience increased employee participation and quicker, easier consensus on strategic matters.

### **Toxic Communication**

Communication is how corporate culture is conveyed. It is important to note that there are a variety of forms of organizational communication through multiple means and channels. They include written materials, email and other forms of technological communication tools, direct messages from management, team meetings, organization-wide town halls, division-specific messaging – and a host of others. Through evaluating these channels, responses and outcomes, corporate culture can be decoded and understood.

The most widely cited approach to interpreting corporate culture was developed by Schein (2010). The researcher asserted that there are three levels of organizational culture (Schein, 2010). The first level consists of “visible and feelable structures and processes” as well as “observed behavior” (Schein, 2010, p. 23). These elements are key indicators of an organization’s surface culture. The second level includes shared ideals, goals, values, and aspirations between individuals. The only way to uncover this information is by communicating with team members across levels. The last level of organizational culture is what Schein (2010) calls the “basic underlying assumptions” (p. 23). This level represents what members of an organization believe unconsciously. This level focuses on “taken-for-granted beliefs” and values that can “determine behavior perception, thought and feeling” (Schein, 2010, p. 24). Uncovering this final stage of culture discovery also entirely depends on communication through discussion

with individuals. When the levels are diametrically opposed to one another, individuals experience corporate dissonance. This mixed messaging and insincere communication leads to corrupt, unethical, psychologically unsafe, and weak cultures. An example of mixed messaging and insincere communication is leadership distributing a memo indicating that working remotely is acceptable, while simultaneously penalizing those who elect to exercise that virtual option.

Weak cultures are prime grounds for toxic communication within corporate environments. Organizational culture takes place at the macro-level and is expressed through macro-communication processes. Maladaptive macro-communication processes are defined as “culture and historical systems of meaning that less obviously serve to support and encourage aggression” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012, p. 4). One form of this aggression is corporate gaslighting behavior.

### **Corporate Gaslighting**

Specific and independent studies examining workplace or corporate gaslighting, a form of social gaslighting, are lacking. A direct address of this gap was shared by Sweet (2019). She states, “Sociologists have ignored gaslighting” for too long, and with deeper study, it can be understood as “rooted in social inequalities” (Sweet, 2019, p. 851). Additional literature also exists on a variation of this gap—with terms such as *gaslighting by crowd* and *racial gaslighting* being coined to represent the group, instead of the traditional two-person relationship dynamic (Ahern, 2018). Despite exclusion in independent, singularly focused studies, social gaslighting behavior is covered as a tactical weapon of retaliation and a key feature in workplace psychological abuse research.

One such academic contribution, conducted by Ahern (2018), has covered whistleblower trauma and why it happens. This research has examined cognitive disconnects that occur as a



result of whistleblower harassment. Gaslighting behavior and its effects were noted (Ahern, 2018). The correlations were based on case study analysis. Ahern (2018) indicated whistleblowers often struggle to reconcile what *should* be happening with what *is* happening after confronting wrongdoing. The synopsis of the findings highlighted that intimate partner violence describes processes of abuse strikingly similar to those experienced by whistleblowers, which Ahern (2018) referred to as whistleblower gaslighting. This finding aligns directly with similar findings detailing the psychological toll that workplace truth tellers often endure (Ahern, 2018).

The EEOC has issued calls for companies to provide more retaliation training organic to their corporate culture (Brooks et al., 2013). Researchers also assert that more attention to retaliation definition is needed, specifically as it relates to mental health impacts. An empirical study found that retaliation is not simply resource-based but often includes psychological disturbances which cause the whistleblower to consider their own stability (Kenny et al., 2019). This is a key symptom of gaslighting behavior (Ahern, 2018). OSHA has also asserted that retaliation training should incorporate guidance on gaslighting behaviors that can result in retaliation cases (Smith, 2015). The organization cites gaslighting elements of peer pressure, ostracizing, and exclusion from meetings as examples (Smith, 2015).

Research indicates that the more subtle forms of psychological abuse, such as gaslighting behaviors, result in lower levels of affective commitment in the workplace. Courcy et al. (2019) examined psychological abuse impacts within the workplace at a large French-Canadian University using data obtained from 1,224 participants. The researchers found a connection between higher turnover, diminished commitment level, and workplace psychological abuse (Courcy et al., 2019). Their exploration also revealed a lack of research in this space indicating

that the “consequences of exposure to more subtle forms of psychological violence on work-relevant outcomes remains scarce” (Courcy et al., 2019, p. 34).

### **Employee Manipulation**

Gaslighting is a significantly damaging tactic because “the perpetrator externalizes and projects their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, while the victim incorporates and assimilates the reality being created for them” (Knapp, 2019, p. 313). It is an expert form of employee manipulation. Manipulative and deceptive tactics within the work environment have been the topic of substantial professional and academic inquiry over the years. In one such study, Jonason et al. (2012) found that gender plays a role in manipulative work approaches. Leveraging key indicators of the widely referenced *Dark Triad* – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism as an anchor, 419 working professionals were surveyed. Their findings indicated that men are more likely to use hard tactics of manipulation (direct threats and intimidation) and women are more likely to use soft tactics (offering compliments). This provides solid insights into the profile of gaslight perpetrators.

Studies have been also conducted to learn how to minimize employee manipulation across organizations. In a cross-sectional, multi-source survey study with a sample of 159 unique leader-follower dyads, Belschak et al. (2018) found that employee Machiavellianism (employees determined to achieve their goals even if unethically) comes with “reduced helping behavior and increased knowledge hiding and emotional manipulation, but only when ethical leadership is low” (p. 1). The stronger a leader’s ethics appear, the lower the reports are for manipulative tactics such as gaslighting behaviors (Belschak et al., 2018).

Research covering the damaging effects of employee manipulation and psychological abuse is useful to this study. It provides insights into the psychology and psychopathy of

gaslighters. By identifying their traits and how to diffuse their power positions within organizations, substantiated guidance can be shared during isolated training sessions and vignette creation.

### **Workplace Training on Unwanted Behavior**

Through corporate training sessions, organizations attempt to shape culture by attaining broad agreement and socialization on certain desired behaviors. This agreement aids in faster detection and correction of norms, practices, and procedures (Gochhayat et al., 2017). To substantiate anti-corporate gaslighting training as suggested in this study, it is important to note the findings of similar trainings and correlating efficacy. The literature reveals various applicable studies related to workplace training against undesirable behaviors. The correlations are largely positive. Despite these positive connections, the literature is clear that some workplace training methods against unwanted behavior prove more effective than others.

In a study conducted at the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Antecol and Cobb-clark (2003) discovered that sexual harassment training was associated with increased awareness and sensitivity – particularly for male participants. The researchers examined this by capturing prior and post training viewpoints regarding which behaviors constitute harassment. While this was a positive indicator, the study did not extend to measurement of learning transfer. The researchers also did not assess whether there were any reductions in sexual harassment claims following the training.

In fact, in a study conducted across 800 companies, Dobbin and Kaleb (2019) discovered that sexual harassment training frequently backfires. They noted a correlation between when sexual harassment training was conducted, and a 5% - 7% reduction of women hired at the managerial level. A corresponding survey revealed that men felt concerned about potential

unsubstantiated claims of sexual harassment. The researchers suggested a different approach to the training sessions by reframing the curriculum to be bystander-focused versus perpetrator-focused. This approach repositioned attending men as allies resulting in improved results (Dobbin & Kaleb, 2019). Facilitators may have arrived at this solution earlier by surveying attendees about sentiments related to the harassment training prior to the experience. In doing this, responses may have revealed their preconceptions, which could have resulted in the useful pivot in characterization. This approach aligns with the vignette approach in this study which leverages that bystander concept. Participants experienced the vignettes as observers, thereby increasing their ability to take an objective approach to former preconceptions (Dobbin & Kaleb, 2019).

Burke et al. (2006) analyzed 95 quasi-experimental studies published between 1971 and 2003 and found that relevant findings on training effectiveness explored combating workplace harassment and discrimination malpractices. Their results indicated that engaging methods of training resulted in meaningful behavioral performance improvements (Burke et al., 2006). While their research focused on behavioral changes related to either passive learning (computer-based) lecture-learning, or action-based learning with engagement, it substantiated that training interventions can prove effective in shifting behavior (Burke et al., 2006). Based on these studies, it can be concluded that workplace training is a relevant workplace strategy and is worthwhile when delivered through a tested approach and an appropriate engagement model.

### **Vignettes as a Tool**

Unlike structured interviews or surveys, vignettes “act as a stimulus to extended discussion of the vignette in question” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183). Importantly, vignettes have an emphasis in sociology. They are “collected situated data on group values, group beliefs

and group norms of behavior” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183). This definition correlates with this study’s sociological perspective as it applies to the concept of corporate gaslighting. Researchers have also asserted that well-constructed vignettes can elicit more realistic responses from participants. They highlighted that the feedback they receive is more indicative of what the participant would do in everyday life (Gourlay et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2010; Pennings et al., 2020).

In Jenkins et al.’s (2010) study, 15 young persons admitted into the hospital for drug use were presented with drug-related interactive vignettes. Interactive vignettes provide the ability to select what should happen next in the presented story. The researchers found that the vignette responses were predictive of what was transpiring in the drug user’s life—not the fictionalized, created character. For instance, in an incident where a participant indicated that the character in the vignette switched a urine sample to appear clean, the researchers identified this as a self-evident assumption (Jenkins et al., 2010, p. 220). These ontological assumptions serve as windows into the group norms and belief systems that a participant holds.

Gourlay et al. (2014) also tested the ability of vignettes to serve as useful tools for qualitative narrative study. Social workers were finding that members of certain communities were reluctant to provide health data when interviewed directly. Gourlay et al. (2014) examined whether vignette use could change this. They interviewed 23 participants impacted by HIV, including HIV-positive women, their children, and several men of unknown status. The researchers indicated that use of vignettes achieved their main objectives, which was to “put participants at ease, generating data on barriers to service updates” (Gourlay et al., 2014, p. 20). They also noted, “Participants’ responses to the vignette often reflected their own experience” (p. 20).

In a final reference to vignette usefulness to inspire realistic, personalized responses, a study conducted by Pennings et al. (2020) leveraged two vignettes to test the impact of informal learning interventions. Participants included 96 Dutch military service members. The researchers elected to use a comic strip method to increase participants' visualization of the vignette vignettes. The training was executed through a virtual training environment that participants were accustomed to using for "tactical training, experimentation, and mission rehearsal for land, sea and air" (Pennings et al., 2020, p. 3). The researchers noted similar findings the previous studies mentioned—vignette use encouraged participants to move beyond the storyline and apply their own experiences. This was the same outcome for both separate and distinct vignettes.

### **Role of Facilitator**

The role of the facilitator during corporate trainings varies from organization to organization; however, the desired outcome is the same: the shared concept is understood and used in practice in the workplace. A study of 237 employees from one academic institution and three businesses in Maryland, Delaware, and Arizona found a direct correlation between *positive* training experiences and improved belief in one's work proficiency (Truitt, 2011). Given this study and others conveying similar findings, the facilitator should understand that this role holds significant responsibility, resulting in tangible impacts on how participants feel about their own effectiveness.

This literature review proves that there is enough research, professional desire, and psychological and sociological interest related to the subtle inequity of corporate gaslighting. This study seeks to deepen this interest and contribute substantiative to the existing body of literature while inspiring further research.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Design

For the purposes of this study, three selectees attended a targeted anti-corporate gaslighting training. Following the session, they underwent interview-style testing, leveraging vignettes designed to measure their ability to identify gaslighting behavior. Participants responded to vignette prompts narrative-style.

Vignette assessment testing was performed to determine whether participants were able to accurately identify if corporate gaslighting was present in a specific vignette. Responding to the prompts, the participants provided literary narratives that accompanied the anonymized storylines being presented. Literary narratives often result from this training efficacy approach as researchers “focus on the discourse that individuals use to describe their experiences” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35). This discourse is often relayed when discussing the respective narrative arcs and can provide useful insights and valued context substantiating an individual’s selection. Therefore, the study did not merely examine whether participants make the right judgments when identifying gaslighting behavior. It also included *why* they made those assumptions based on their own acquired and intrinsic knowledge base. This was critical to understanding their views of context, chronology, and causality presented in the vignettes.

This study was led to answer three research questions related to the potential efficacy of isolated anti-corporate gaslighting training. These inquiries included:

- Q1) How do participants identify when the vignette shifts into corporate gaslighting territory?
- Q2) What perceptions do Learning & Development and Human Resources professionals have of the training experience?

Q3) What do participants believe the usefulness of this isolated training is for organizations like theirs?

To find the answers, the isolated anti-corporate gaslighting training had to be created and ultimately delivered to the three pilot participants.

### **Training Specifics**

I developed and led the one-hour virtual session, isolating anti-corporate gaslighting training from other undesirable workplace behaviors. The learning experience included an orientation on the following concepts:

- Background on the overarching concept of gaslighting (i.e., its theatrical roots, psychological adaptations, features, and applications)
- Definition of the concept of corporate gaslighting (i.e., the sociological implications of gaslighting and gaslighting within group environments such as the workplace, gaps, and progress in the research)
- Examples and features of corporate gaslighting (i.e., isolation, information withholding, and diminishment)
- Impact on individual (i.e., traumas from psychological abuse, depression, and anxiety)
- Impact to the organization (i.e., retaliation case statistics, presenteeism, trust erosion, and less diversity)
- Disarming corporate gaslighting (i.e., rooting out bias, self-evaluation, and champion inclusion)

The session was bi-directional, with chat-enabled breaks for participants to share in-the-moment feedback. As the facilitator, I comprehend the power of a well-delivered training session in the workplace. My role was to convey the material that is available and to explain the concepts



clearly and succinctly. I listened keenly to the training participants and responded promptly to inquiries and clarified any points that were not resonating.

### **Scholarship of integration and application**

Ernest Boyer (1990) chartered a model of scholarship which includes four separate, yet overlapping functions: the scholarship of *discovery*, the scholarship of *integration*, the scholarship of *application*, and the scholarship of *teaching*. Based on the definitions, the research, production, and delivery of the anti-corporate gaslighting training largely relied on the scholarship integration and application.

Scholarship of integration is defined as “making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating nonspecialists, too” (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). This integrative approach was evidenced throughout the training session. For example, in the beginning of the learning experience, I began with the introduction of the psychological and dyadic definition of gaslighting. I was aware that most individuals would be accustomed to hearing about gaslighting from this perspective. Further into the session, I expanded on this precept by introducing the sociological component to the discussion, ultimately adding the elements of social reinforcement in workplace environments. This generative correlation was integrative in its connection across psychological and sociological disciplines. I also demonstrated the scholarship of integration by sharing the EEOC data and its direct correlations with corporate gaslighting behavior. This fits Boyer’s (1990) description of “illuminating data in a revealing way” (p. 18). Integrative inflections continued with common references to other forms of toxic communication and undesirable workplace behaviors.

Scholarship of application is the intersection of theory and practice. Boyer (1990) claims that each renews the other – creating a dynamic cycle. He leverages the following three questions that scholars should ask as they engage in scholarly application: (1) How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? (2) How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions? (3) Can social problems themselves define an agenda for scholarly investigation? I believe that this pilot study fits into this categorization. To respond to each of Boyer's (1990) qualifying inquiries: (1) This study's knowledge can be applied directly through organizational training. (2) It can be helpful to institutions by offering the context, language and awareness needed to identify and protect against corporate gaslighting behavior. (3) Lastly, corporate gaslighting, especially when present in retaliation efforts, is indeed a social problem. As a result, the agenda for further scholarly investigation can be easily expressed and validated.

With both the scholarship of integration and application functions as guideposts for this pilot study, the training was designed from a practical and tactical sense. Its scholarly intention is to inspire understanding, learning transference, and use in the learning and development plans of psychological safety conscious organizations.

### **Participants and Sampling**

This study employed the purposive sampling model. The participant pool was comprised of three Learning & Development and Human Resources business leaders. Each leader works at a different firm in the finance, staffing, and consulting sectors. Each participant has the authority and responsibility to access, deliver, and evaluate training and training efficacy and effectiveness for their respective organizations. They were selected for their distinct experience identifying gaps in workforce training.

The first participant (Participant 1) serves as vice president of Learning & Development of a creative service staffing company. She leads a team of professionals who create, lead and source training experiences. Most recently, she has been focused on sourcing Diversity Equity & Inclusion resources for the agency's employees.

The second participant (Participant 2) is a Learning & Development trainer working at a banking/credit card firm. She has held the role for ten years after previously working in media Business-to-Business sales. Her position requires her to work closely with the external members, leading them through technical training modules designed to equip them for in-demand developer roles. She also coordinates mandatory trainings that address workplace malpractices such as discrimination and harassment.

The third participant (Participant 3) is a public administrator working for a consortium of local California governments. She has been in the industry for more than fifteen years. Her role focuses on ensuring rules and regulations are followed related to budgets, community engagements, and to a lesser extent, human capital. In this role, she executes training across that focus on the mitigation of toxic work behaviors.

All participants were familiar with my consulting firm, Johnson Squared, LLC. They have either received paid or unpaid advisement or partnership in connection with the Diversity Equity and Inclusion work conducted by my company.

### **Instrumentation**

The study required minimal instruments for effectiveness. They included 1) vignette interview sessions, 2) narrative analysis, 3) Zoom application with recording availability, 4) Microsoft One note, 5) Excel pivot table access, 6) Readability application, and 7) Interview guide.

I developed the vignettes based on real-world vignettes gathered from feedback from professionals I had consulted with through my private firm, Johnson Squared Consulting, LLC. All names in the vignette vignettes were changed to protect anonymity. The vignettes were brief and included short scenes, moments, or impressions about a specific set of characters. Vignettes were shared in the third point of view. I was committed to leveraging the sociological approach to vignette interviewing. This entailed creating an interactive, generalized snapshot vignette and then allowing the story to unfold based on the participants' responses (Jenkins et al., 2010).

Narrative analysis, a useful tool for this study, is described as a “credible source of knowledge for scholars engaged in theory building” (Larty & Hamilton, 2011, p. 220). Since narratives are reliable sources of sociological information, a great deal of empirical evidence is often available (Franzosi, 1998). The participants in this study used narrative through the combined use of vignette tools and their own perceptions, beliefs, and histories.

I conducted a readability analysis to test whether shared vignettes conveyed simple and clear character use, context, and chronology. This was accomplished by using the Readability application. The Readability application produces a score that indicates whether text is sensible and easy to read.

There was no survey produced for this study. All results were based on structured interviews. The interview guide used was brief, with short, standardized questions following the vignettes and an introductory script.

## Analysis

Vignettes are often used in studies and qualitative interviews as an interpretative framework. The participants have an opportunity to evaluate the information through their own prisms and state their sentiments based on their individualized thoughts. This differs from the use of a multiple-choice survey where study participants are confined to pre-populated answers. In fact, studies show that the less prescriptive the vignette is, the more personalized the responses become. A research project termed the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study fielded three series of general health vignettes to 2,550 participants (Grol-Prokopczyk, 2018). The three vignettes were written at varying levels of description. Results indicated that the more general the vignettes “were preferable to ones describing highly specific conditions/procedures” (Grol-Prokopczyk, 2018, p. 53).

Since vignettes provide sketches of fictional vignettes and invite participants to imagine and then share anticipated behavior (Jenkins et al., 2010), it is critical to establish learning transfer measurement guidelines. To do this, the vignettes were coded to substantiate participant responses (Vogt et al., 2012). This coding was produced against language attributes to quantify the participants’ ability to select the gaslighting behaviors. Participants’ responsive narratives were then examined for thematic overlaps demonstrating conceptual understanding.

“Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Vaughn & Turner, 2016, p. 42). There are multiple ways to code narratives. For the purposes of this study, I used theme coding and pattern coding. Pattern coding is defined as developing “meta-codes that identify similarly coded data by grouping them and generating major themes” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016, p. 131). Theme coding is defined as the

“identification of codes in the form of sentences capturing the essence and essentials of participant meanings” (p. 132).

Upon training session completion and following vignette testing, I took each participant’s responses and grouped them by theme. Following this exercise and after reviewing all participant testing, I moved on to pattern coding. This involved taking the information provided by all participants and identifying similar themes. For instance, “All three participants described bias as a factor in corporate gaslighting.” The same process was repeated for the overall experience and training feasibility interviews.

## Administration

Engagement for the study took place in phases. They include:

- 1) **Introductory invitation for participation acceptance:** I sent a written email to confirm that participants were available for the training and ensuing testing. It also included the schedule for engagement. Upon receipt of a confirmation from the potential participant, the next step toward consent followed.
- 2) **Informed consent form deliverance:** I sent an email with an informed consent form for return to confirmed participants.
- 3) **Training Execution:** Participants received no financial gifts and did not pay for any element of this pilot experience. All participants were past clients of my Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) firm and had no active projects with my company during the duration of training or testing. The training sessions took place via Zoom and included a PowerPoint presentation. Following the training presentation, an overview of next steps was presented.
- 4) **Vignette Testing:** Vignettes were presented following the training presentation to identify if participants could determine where corporate gaslighting is evident and how those determinations were made. I read the vignettes to each participant, followed by a series of standardized questions.
- 5) **Interview for Feedback:** This session was dedicated to feedback on the training presentation and experience itself. Participants commented on flow, aesthetics, and areas for improvement.
- 6) **Member Check:** Upon transcription, I provided the copy to the participants to ensure awareness of the capture and answer any questions. This was managed via email.

Detailed description of the phased, training and testing experience are outlined below.

**Table 1**

<b>Training/Testing Task Order Date</b>	<b>Activity/Description</b>
1. January 13, 2022	<i>Training session</i> held via Zoom for all three participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-hour long</li> <li>• Explains history of terms</li> <li>• Reviews signs of corporate gaslighting</li> <li>• Explains how to combat corporate gaslighting</li> </ul>
2. January 13-16, 2022	<i>Vignette testing</i> took place with each participant. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants were read each vignette</li> <li>• Asked to respond to pre-established questions</li> <li>• Responses were recorded for analysis</li> <li>• Testing and interview for feedback on the course itself was led by the facilitator</li> </ul>
3. January 13-16, 2022	<i>Interview for feedback on course</i> took place immediately following the vignette testing.

The vignettes were designed to determine whether the participants were able to accurately identify gaslighting behavior and explore the reasoning for these identifications. There were five hypothetical vignettes shared with each participant. It is important to note that story development included nuanced information. These were not glaring examples of corporate gaslighting. They included subtle cases and references to environments that mirror the participants' current workplaces. Since all participants were Learning & Development or Human Resource professionals, vignettes were used that they were familiar with. This made the vignettes easier to conceptualize.

### **Ethics**

I have previously developed professional relationships with the participants through my private company, Johnson Squared, LLC. In this role, I have advised or partnered with these participants as it relates to their organization's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility policies, procedures, learning curriculums, and related strategies. At the time of the training,



testing and feedback portions of this study, I was not actively supporting any project for the participants. I did not provide gifts, financial or otherwise to the participants. In addition, they did not pay for the training session.

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to explore the voices of participants, I requested written sign off to clearly illustrate the rules of engagement and protection of individual and corporate identities. I also guaranteed quality and integrity of research by using one-to-one transcription and ensuring data protection. All data were stored on my personal computer, which was password protected. I was the only person with access to the data. The data was deleted from my personal computer following the completion of this dissertation. The data deletion took place through the personal computer's recycle bin feature. This ensured removal of the information from the hardware and is step beyond basic software/document deletion.

### **Informed Consent**

As previously mentioned, all participants were asked to complete an informed consent form. This form included a confidentiality statement, protection of participant data, understanding of the study's purpose, and outlines any potential risks. Signed informed consent forms were stored on my google drive and retained for five years following the study.

### **Bracketing**

I believe that corporate gaslighting is an underrepresented and unacknowledged form of workplace abuse. Therefore, I needed to avoid imposing this belief onto participants by way of training, interviews, or vignette development. In addition, I added bracketing to indicate any conflict of interest related to the professional relationship shared with the study participants.

Consideration was also given to the fact that I developed the vignettes, and while the content was reviewed for ease of understanding, the context was my own. In developing these

stories, I worked with a Diversity Equity & Inclusion colleague to ensure there were no unconscious biases that seep through the vignettes' structure, the personality of the characters, terminology, and references used.

### **Contribution**

Psychological safety is defined as being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career (Clancy, 2019). Corporate gaslighting behavior diminishes this psychological safety. This study could provide insightful information validating or invalidating isolated anti-gaslighting training as an effective tool against this form of workplace psychological abuse. Despite its limited ability to track change over extended periods of time, and its limited scope, this pilot experience can provide cornerstone analysis on training efficacy related to this critical workforce dynamic. Importantly, it may also provide the language necessary to identify gaslighting behaviors and processes as they take place at the social level for potential victims. Studies show that Americans spend 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime (Pryce-Jones, 2010). This equates to ten years of human life. Inroads and illuminations in any area pertaining to whole employee health are contributory not only to organizations, researchers, and individuals but the overarching human condition.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the results of the study. Each research question was answered in accordance with the outlined methodology. Participants attended an hour-long anti-corporate gaslighting course, followed by vignette testing, and finally responded to inquiries about the experience and usefulness of the isolated training. While simple in its approach, the findings indicated that participants' understanding of corporate gaslighting had developed in complexity. Their responses were multi-layered and traversed between personal experience, professional knowledge, and their newly acquired comprehension of the presented material.

#### **Test Specifics**

Participants were read the five vignettes (Tables 2–6) and asked a series of questions. For the purposes of this study, the most critical of the inquiries focused on the presence of corporate gaslighting and the thought process around which components of the vignette made this evident. All vignettes exhibited corporate gaslighting, albeit, in various capacities and with varying indicators.

**Table 2***Vignette 1*

Vignette #	Vignette	Corporate Gaslighting (Presence)	Corporate Gaslighting (Indicators)
1	<p>Shade is a thirty-four-year-old manager at an insurance firm. One day, when she arrives at the office, her boss, Jim, asks for a meeting. Once she arrives, he impatiently asks her why she did not attend the recent leadership presentation.</p> <p>Shade remembers that Jim told her that she did not have to join the leadership presentations when she asked last week. She reminds Jim of this. He responds incredulously, “I never said that. You need to be at every leadership presentation. This is the second one that you’ve missed! Shade, you really have to get on the ball.”</p> <p>When she leaves his office, Shade remembers similar instances of Jim stating one thing and then angrily requesting another. She wonders why he did not contact her to alert her to the leadership presentation if the expectations regarding her attendance had changed.</p>	<p>Jim’s denial and refusal to consider he told Shade she did <i>not</i> need to attend the leadership presentation.</p> <p>Jim’s accusation that Shade is not on the ball as a result.</p>	<p>Withholding valuable information.</p> <p>Causing victim to question her memory.</p> <p>Potential for inequitable social reinforcement (due to leadership meeting absence).</p>

**Table 3***Vignette 2*

<b>Vignette #</b>	<b>Vignette</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Presence)</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Indicators)</b>
2	<p>Tyler is known as the fun coworker in the office. He is always making jokes and planning get togethers. Stephanie is new to the firm and noticed that some of Tyler's jokes towards her don't seem as fun and light as they are with others.</p> <p>Stephanie also noticed that his comments toward her tend to center on her Latinx culture. One day, with just the two of them in the break room, Tyler casually asked Stephanie how her weekend was. Stephanie replied, "It was great!" Tyler stated, "I'm sure it was, I know how you people like to get together and have big family barbeques! Did some of your cousins come for a visit for some pinata fun – or did you just all hang out and make empanadas?"</p> <p>This made Stephanie feel targeted, marginalized, and reduced to stereotypes. She decided to talk to Cindy in HR. Cindy called a meeting with Tyler. He stated, "I have no idea what Stephanie is referencing. I simply asked her how her weekend was. I'm sorry if that's offensive."</p> <p>Cindy elected to close the concern. Tyler then began telling the rest of the team members that Stephanie had gone to HR and reported her for asking how her weekend was. Now, her teammates seem more off standish.</p>	<p>Tyler's denial and accusation to Cindy in HR.</p> <p>Cindy's dismissal of the case.</p> <p>Tyler's manipulative rumor spreading to the rest of the team.</p>	<p>Leveraging inequitable social reinforcement.</p> <p>Deploying untruths.</p> <p>Reality bending to both HR and others.</p> <p>Diminishment of employee concerns.</p> <p>Isolation of target employee.</p> <p>Weaponizing social capital.</p>

**Table 4***Vignette 3*

<b>Vignette #</b>	<b>Vignette</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Presence)</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Indicators)</b>
3	<p>Serena works for a marketing firm that has a high-pressure corporate culture. Their motto is <i>“Hustle hard and play harder.”</i></p> <p>During a happy hour, Serena mentions how burnt out she feels working 60 hours a week. Her coworkers accuse her of “not thinking positively.” One coworker, Alexandria, even says that if Serena had more success with her accounts – she wouldn’t be complaining about the workload.</p> <p>Two days later, Serena was pulled into a meeting with management to discuss her lack of enthusiasm. She is told that some people just aren’t cut out to be the best marketers – and that she should consider what she <i>really</i> wants for a career.</p>	<p>Alexandria’s response to Serena.</p> <p>Management’s response to Serena.</p>	<p>Leveraging inequitable social reinforcement.</p> <p>Diminishment of employee concerns.</p>

**Table 5***Vignette 4*

<b>Vignette #</b>	<b>Vignette</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Presence)</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Indicators)</b>
4	<p>Newly married Juanita is excited to attend her company's holiday party. Out of the ten years, she's attended, she has never had a date. Her husband, Jermaine, is equally thrilled. He goes out and buys a tuxedo with touches that are the same maroon color as Juanita's dress. He knows how important Juanita takes her job at the investment firm and wants to represent her well.</p> <p>Finally, the day comes! They drive up to the front of the hotel and Jermaine states he needs to run to the restroom and asks Juanita if she wouldn't mind parking. He hops out, goes to the restroom, and then comes back out to wait for Juanita to enter. While he's standing there, a gentleman gets out of his vehicle and throws Jermaine his keys. He says, "Look up the tag" as he walks into the building. Jermaine realizes that the man mistook him for a valet.</p> <p>When Juanita returns, Jermaine explains what happened. They decide to head home. After Jermaine describes the man to Juanita, she realizes the key thrower was her coworker, Jim. The following day, she goes to the office and pulls Jim aside. She says, "Bill, you mistook my husband for a valet at the Christmas party. You threw him your keys. I know you, and I know that you didn't make this mistake personally – but it was incredibly insensitive. Black people are frequently mistaken for the "help" and its hurtful."</p> <p>Jim states, "Wow. That's really pulling the race card, isn't it? Your husband was standing out front in a tuxedo. Race has nothing to do with it. Please stop with the fake outrage – it's annoying."</p>	Jim's initial response to Juanita.	<p>Diminishment of peer employee's concern.</p> <p>Subvert comments designed to trigger, "i.e., race card."</p> <p>Potential for inequitable social reinforcement.</p>

**Table 6***Vignette 5*

<b>Vignette #</b>	<b>Vignette</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Presence)</b>	<b>Corporate Gaslighting (Indicators)</b>
5	<p>Every Tuesday, the engineering team at Theranos has a Happy Hour. Like clockwork, around 4:30, they start packing up and head across the street to the Rockin' Rooster. John is new to the team and wonders when he'll receive an invite to attend – but as the weeks roll on, the day never comes.</p> <p>One day he receives an email from Eric, the leader of the Rockin' Rooster Happy Hour crew. It says, "Absolutely do not want John at Happy Hour – the guy is as fun as watching paint dry. If any one of you yahoos invites him...you are out too!" He finished the email with a row of laughing emojis. John isn't sure if Eric meant for him to see the message.</p>	John's email to the team.	<p>Isolation of employee.</p> <p>Inequitable social reinforcement.</p> <p>Weaponizing social capital.</p>

Based on multiple studies, vignette assessment testing is a sound approach to analyze learning transfer and the potential for application. Jeffries and Maeder (2004) evaluated the use of vignettes as a method of assessing pedagogical understanding in teacher development courses from 1995 to 2003. They found vignette assessments are not only effective, but “significantly correlated with more traditional forms of assessment, are highly predictive of course-ending project performances, and represent an episode of learning in their own right” (Jeffries & Maeder, 2004, p. 17). The course-ending project performances referenced by Jeffries and Maeder related to culminating projects following courses and their respective score outcomes.



Upon vignette assessing for this pilot study, I found resonance with these findings. Participants were notably engaged and referenced continued focus on how they would apply the learnings within their own environments.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis took place following the recorded training session, vignette testing, and efficacy interviews. Coding was conducted through the use of an excel document, which correlated to the respective research questions. Following the data aggregation, the narratives were closely examined to identify thematic codes, disaggregated, and re-grouped thematically.

### **Outcomes for R1**

Research Question one, which asks, “How do participants identify when the vignette shifts into corporate gaslighting territory?” required baselining. To do so, at the beginning of the training, participants were immediately asked to respond to one question: “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term *corporate gaslighting*?” Figure 6 indicates the themes revealed based on the participant responses.

All three participants added caveats about the implicit toxicity of gaslighting behavior. Multiple, compounding parallels were made to abusive, dyadic relationships. Participants also emphasized the psychological disturbing tactics that gaslighting uses by expressing terms such as “manipulation” and “making you believe that you are crazy.”

They drew the distinctions between “relationship gaslighting” and “corporate gaslighting” as the latter term taking place in the workplace and potentially being void of romantic dynamics. There were no mentions from participants about the elements of social reinforcement or weaponizing social capital among groups. Following the training, the

participants' concept of corporate gaslighting expanded to include the sociological and toxic communication elements as evidenced in post-training vignette testing.

**Table 7***Codes*

Code Name	Description	Sample Narrative
Psychological disturbance “the crazy factor”	Presence of psychological disturbance as a key indicator of corporate gaslighting.	<p>Participant 1: I will jump out there and just say that within a corporate environment what comes to mind for me is someone, anyone, a peer, an associate, a manager speaking to you in a way that makes you feel like you're going crazy.</p> <p>*All attendees offered words of affirmation to this statement.</p>
Dyadic Relationship	Presence of dyadic relationship in which one party has power over another as a key indicator of corporate gaslighting.	<p>Participant 1: [It's] like being in a narcissistic relationship and perhaps within a corporate space, being in a narcissistic relationship with someone in a position of authority, who has you questioning yourself.</p> <p>Participant 2: It could be anyone, but what comes to mind first for me though, is leadership or management people in those positions.</p> <p>Participant 3: It <i>can</i> happen with anyone, but I think of it as something that happens with a leader and manager and their [employee] too.</p>
Diminishment	Presence of diminishment as a key feature of corporate gaslighting.	<p>Participant 1: it's that you're, you're questioning everything –you feel invalidated.</p> <p>Participant 3: Agree. Like when you try to report something has happened, like you're in a meeting and you're not able to have your voice be heard or, you know, you're constantly having microaggressions committed against you. And then when you try to report it, the person treats you like you're inventing it, or maybe you misunderstood. It's just, it's the feeling of not being believed.</p>

***Social Reinforcement Theme***

Following the training session, participants were tested to determine whether they could accurately identify corporate gaslighting training in five work-related vignettes. Each participant was able to pinpoint where the gaslighting took place with total accuracy. Their responses as to *how* they made these determinations indicated successful learning transference.

In Vignette Two, featuring the characters Tyler and Stephanie, all three participants used the social element of the vignette to accurately pinpoint corporate gaslighting. This differed from their original descriptions of the more interpersonal forms of gaslighting behavior and indicated learning transference. Participant 1 noted this directly. Following her accurate selection of corporate gaslighting in the vignette:

In this scenario, [vignette] from a learning perspective, I like being able take this out and be like, no, this wasn't right. This is inappropriate – this is a microaggression, but then *here* is where the gaslighting is taking place. It's really drawing attention to why those things are different. It started out without the social aspect, like you talked about. But it's when he goes further to tell other people, I see this isn't just an unfortunate situation, but also a good example of corporate gaslighting. I'm like – this is all connected, but also different.

Participant 2 also indicated the key feature of the social element in her answer to Vignette Two, the Tyler and Stephanie example. This exemplified post-training learning transference. She shared, “If you're just dealing with one jerk, so to speak, that's one thing. But when you're dealing with the social capital that a person may wield, then that really compounds the psychological damage.” Participant 3 noted this social element as well during vignette testing, indicating during Vignette 3, the Alexandria and Serena example, “That's the social

reinforcement! See, everyone else is getting aligned. Yeah. And that makes it even more, more powerful.”

Participants were not only accurate in their identification of corporate gaslighting, but they also demonstrated knowledge of how this power dynamic shows itself within the work environment. One of those key indicators was the social element of corporate gaslighting and each participant used this component to make the right deduction.

### ***Psychological Abuse Theme***

All participants referenced the psychologically abusive element of gaslighting throughout their test responses. This correlation was mentioned prior to the session during the baseline question; therefore, it is not an indicator of new knowledge. However, this gaslighting key feature was continuously evident in the vignette testing. During Vignette Five, the John and Eric example, Participant 1 stated, “Well, the exclusion is definitely [corporate gaslighting]. But now, that last line really has me uncomfortable. There's a whole other level of psychological abuse.”

Participant 2 put herself in the position of Shade from Vignette One, stating “It further serves to have an employee feeling like, is it me? Am I crazy? Like I'm doubting myself and my recollection and memory.”

Participant 3 also took on the character position of Shade from Vignette One, sharing, “You know, like, you're like, you're the one who's crazy. You think that these things are not really happening, that you're inventing it when, you know, in fact that these things are happening, and you are not crazy.” By using the psychological component as evidence of corporate gaslighting, participants demonstrate that they are using an accurate indicator to identify this maladaptive behavior.

***Toxic Communication***

In addition to psychological abuse and social reinforcement features, participants also recognized corporate gaslighting was taking place in the vignette by its toxic communication component. In their responses to the vignette vignettes, the identification of this feature was made apparent in their narratives.

Participant 1 made the following statement during Vignette Three, the Serena and Alexandria example,

This kind of goes back to one of the bullets you shared in your presentation about the cultural communication of the workplace. And, I hate to say it, but the cultural communication that exists there, [seems to be] that if you say something negative, the cultural communication approach is “I’m going to cultivate favor with management by telling on you.” I mean...c’mon.

Participant 2 also noted toxic communication taking place during Vignette Four, the Juanita and Jim example, stating “She approached him in a way that was far nicer than he deserved in my opinion. His response is just mind-blowingly disrespectful.” This participant cited toxic communication in all five vignettes as documented in the previous example. It appeared that this participant relied heavily on this component to make the determination of whether corporate gaslighting was taking place.

***Additional Corporate Gaslighting Tactics***

During vignette testing, participants also used the presence of specific tactics, outside of the more heavily cited social reinforcement element, to substantiate their determinations of when and where corporate gaslighting was present. These tactics were shared and discussed during the training session.

They included the following:

- Isolation – intentionally leaving target employee out of meetings/conversation
- Information Withholding – purposefully withholding information that is necessary for the target employee to complete a task or prepare for discussions
- Diminishment – trivializing and minimizing an employee's concern and workplace reality.
- Subvert Comments – making subversive, triggering statements to an employee in an attempt to provoke an unfavorable reaction.
- Untruths – declaring untruths as facts (i.e., “I sent you the meeting a week ago) with the intent to make the target employee question their reality
- Inequitable social reinforcement – gaining and influencing the “wisdom of the crowd” to substantiate gaslighting claims about the target employee.
- Reality-bending – having extreme variations following discussions or interactions (i.e., “I thought we had a lovely conversation about your high performance” after a bash session)

Participant 1 referenced the presence of diminishment in her reaction to Vignette Three, the Serena and Alexandria example. She stated,

Faulting her for how she's feeling about things and [saying] that if she had had more success with her accounts, then she would have nothing to complain about [is] like victim blaming essentially. It's your own fault that you're burning yourself out.

Participant 2 mentioned inequitable social reinforcement during testing. She stated the following in response to a Vignette Two, the Stephanie and Tyler example:

This nails why people don't report this stuff, right? It's commonly known in organizations that HR (Human Resources) protects the organization [and] does not protect the employees. And she was punished for going to HR essentially. Happens all the time.

Participant 3 indicated withholding valuable information was a key factor in her determination of whether corporate gaslighting was present in Vignette One, the Serena and Jim example, stating “In this case, it almost sounds like he was deliberately trying to sabotage her by telling her you don't have to come to the meeting when he knew full well that her attendance would be expected.”

The use of these more nuanced gaslighting tactics indicates that participants did not only rely on the overall definition expressed in the training. They used some of the more detailed applications to make their determinations as well.

### ***Summary***

Participants used the following four indicators, impacts, features, and characteristics of corporate gaslighting to correctly determine where the dynamic was present: (1) social reinforcement, (2) psychological abuse/reality questioning, (3) toxic communication, and (4) additional gaslighting tactics. This directly aligned with the material that was covered in the session.

This is an example of transformative logic, which is the “interpretation of the imaginative solution into the behavioral and/or symbolic constructed word of the original context” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 27). The participants evoked their imaginations through the vignettes and then reached



back into the original context shared with them during the learning experience. This process assisted them in making the right choices.

Notably, participants did in fact use the vignette tools as anticipated based on studies. This is indicated in the verbatims above. For instance, similar to findings by Gourlay et al. (2014), which stated that participant responses to its vignettes often reflected their own experience, participants often personalized the vignettes. This was especially the case when discussing the psychological impacts of corporate gaslighting. Role transference between the participant and the character was common and became increasingly noticeable as the testing continued.

## **Outcomes for R2**

The second research question “What perceptions do Learning & Development professionals have of the training experience?” was answered during secondary interviews. Participants were asked a series of questions related to the organization and ultimate delivery of the training experience. Both positive themes and themes for improvement were provided.

## **Positive Themes**

All participants agreed that the training objectives were well specified and that the content was well organized and easy to follow. When asked to describe the training experience, in one word, participants used the following terms followed by the respective briefed narratives as indicated in Table 8.

**Table 8***Participants*

Participant #	“One Word” Key Term	Sample Narrative
1	Thought-provoking	Some of this just like knocks you out. But the subtlety of it, I think is, that is really thought provoking. I mean, it certainly has been for me as we've gone through this.
2	Brilliant	I feel like we have not seen information shared this directly with such relevant vignettes that are so true to life. So, this is beyond valuable. This is invaluable information share.
3	Relevant	I think it's so spot on. [And it] provides great fodder for discussion and learning opportunities. I think it's great.

**Opportunity Themes**

All participants had suggestions for how to improve the learning experience when asked. Their comments focused on three major areas: *improvement to content, improvement to presentation, and improvement to delivery.*

***Improvement to Content***

Participant 1 stated that more examples that were subtlety nuanced would have made the content more impactful. This was mentioned multiple times by this participant, and she felt strongly about the value of the less overt examples offered during the session.

Participant 1 also mentioned that I could tie corporate gaslighting to bottom-line impacts, stating:

How I'm really getting through to our sales team with our Diversity Equity & Inclusion content is because I can tie it directly to engagement, and all of the studies that show just how much lower production and sales productivity is when we have disengaged folks.

So, if you could connect that with gaslighting, I was just thinking that could be an impactful bullet.

### ***Improvement to Presentation***

Participant 2 focused primarily on improvements that could be made to the presentation aesthetically. She noted that the background colors were distracting, and the slides were too language dense and suggested more chat breaks. Participant 3 also noted the density of the slides as an opportunity for improvement.

### ***Improvement to Delivery***

Participant 3 mentioned that activities, similar to the chat feature in the beginning and middle of the presentation, could be useful with larger audiences. She suggested group brainstorming – or a “pick your adventure” style segment would keep the audience even more engaged.

All participants responded with relatively moderate enhancements to the learning experience. They focused on engagement, visuals, and continued use of nuance. There was no feedback that indicated lack of information or difficulty with comprehension and applicability.

### **Themes for R3**

The third research question, “What do participants believe the usefulness of this isolated training is for organizations like theirs?” yielded unanimously positive results. All three professionals felt that the training was useful and would be beneficial to their organizations albeit for different reasons. Their feedback was thematically coded into the following areas: *practical use determinations and content novelty*.

### *Practical Use Determinations*

Participants stated that they believed the anti-corporate gaslighting training could serve practical use and would apply within their own environments. They expressed this by stating the usefulness of the content due to its focus on workplace nuance and the opportunity to expand the material to suit the organization's current challenges such as psychological safety in hybrid environments.

Participant 1 indicated that the training would be useful for the respective organization's leadership team. This participant mentioned, "I've had a lot of conversations about gaslighting – but never like we're defining it here. The subtlety of it is really though provoking. I would like this [training] for our leadership team for our [Company Name]."

Participant 2 asked if the training could be brought to her work team in the context of expanding their Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging (DEIB) learning offerings.

Can you bring this [training] to my team? And to my leadership, because you know I feel like the necessity of DEIB is not new, but it's new in the corporate space. And so even within my company, I feel like we have not seen information shared this directly with such relevancy that [is] so true to life. So, this is beyond valuable. This is invaluable information share.

Participant 3 mentioned that the anti-corporate gaslighting training could be especially useful for hybrid (partially remote, partially in-office) teams, stating:

Something that we are seeing a lot now in organizations where they have a hybrid structure. This would be really useful. Because there are those vignettes where certain people come in several days a week and others do not. Those who are not in the office may face gaslighting behavior because of their virtual status. What I mean is, it may be

easier to gaslight as well – it’s easier to purposely isolate someone who is not in the office.

When I synopsisized this thought, saying, “I understand what you mean – it’s easier to gaslight because of potential proximity bias” the participant agreed, stating, “Exactly!”

### ***Content Novelty***

Each participant mentioned some element of the content’s novelty. Participant 1 expressed this sentiment the most explicitly:

I mean, I'll say you've led wonderful workshops with our leadership team around psychological safety, microaggression inclusiveness, inclusive communication. This still, even with all that, still feels different enough, which I think was, part of your question, like, yeah, there's overlaps, but this feels much more distinct.

The novelty of anti-corporate gaslighting training could make it more perceivably valuable from prospective participants’ perspectives.

Participants appreciated the content that was delivered during their anti-corporate gaslighting training. While this is true, they also believed that the delivery could be refined. Provided the suggestions that they made for delivery, the pilot group focused on the content’s valuable traits, such as practicality for use and novelty.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

Results from this study indicate that isolated anti-corporate gaslighting training had value. Professionals tasked with sourcing, cultivating, and leading workplace training all agreed that they believe this specific material would be useful for their respective organizations. In addition, following the learning session, they were able to accurately detect corporate gaslighting behavior in five separate vignettes—proving not just the context for the learning, but the content efficacy as well.

#### Implications for Practitioners

For Learning & Development and Human Resource professionals tasked with ensuring that employees have the knowledge needed to encourage, exemplify, and protect safe and inclusive work behaviors, this study offers one potential tool to address a multi-pronged, particularly insidious issue. As cited previously, the EEOC states that retaliation claims, which often display features of gaslighting behavior, are reported more than any other complaint groups. With the appropriate education, corporate gaslighting can be more easily identified and activities that lead to retaliatory behavior can be avoided or quickly managed when discovered.

#### Design and Delivery Recommendations for Practice

##### *Metaphorical-Abductive Logic*

Anti-corporate gaslighting material should be presented using metaphorical abductive logic. This type of logic helps adult learners make sense of the unknown by comparing it to aspects of their previous experience (Mezirow, 1991). The training conducted in the pilot study

used this logic by first introducing the dyadic, romantic concept of gaslighting and then adding the lesser-known sociological components which contribute to corporate gaslighting.

In a workshop group setting, a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to the vignette vignettes may be effective. Problem-based learning (PBL) is an adult-learning-focused, student-centered approach involving authentic, loosely structured, unfamiliar, and complex problems for students to solve. As for its use in organizational learning experiences, PBL “supports the development of transversal skills and underpins the training of a workforce competent to withstand the constant generation of new information” (Zotou et al., 2020, p. 3393).

### ***Tactical Recommendations for Practice***

While the content and design elements are important, implementation tactics are of equal importance. Having a robust structure in place that can manage post-anti-corporate gaslighting training outcomes is imperative. My tactical recommendations are below.

1. Practitioners should consider using brief surveys, which can offer immediate feedback regarding how valuable participants rate the learning experience. This will provide the tangible, real-time insights that these professionals rely on to make informed decisions for their organizations.
2. Practitioners should seek opportunities to use digital media, through learning platforms or video products. By offering anti-corporate gaslighting training digitally, the content is more accessible to a wider group of audiences.
3. Practitioners should be aware of the escalation process within their organization to report abuse. For instance, if training participants recognize that they are victims of corporate gaslighting, the practitioner should be able to direct them to the right channels, persons, and offices to provide them with support.

4. Human resource leaders should receive additional training on how to escalate issues arising from corporate gaslighting behaviors. This would require a more robust learning session than the all-employee training experience.
5. Due to the subject-matter, it's important to ensure that attendees feel comfortable and free to engage. To do this, trainers should use empathy to connect with participants. This can be accomplished by learning as much as possible about the trainees, their experiences, and their environments (Arghode & Wang, 2016).

Corporate training practitioners have the responsibility of helping organizations shape positive culture through “faster detection and correction of norms, practices and procedures” (Gochhayat et al., 2017, p. 693). By addressing corporate gaslighting directly, these professionals can better equip teams to protect and champion employee inclusion and belonging. In addition, practitioners can use their anti-corporate gaslighting experience to inform further research as “consequences of exposure to more subtle forms of psychological violence on work-relevant outcomes remains scarce” (Courcy et al., 2019, p. 34). The on-the-ground feedback that they receive through their training sessions and any subsequent surveying can prove incredibly useful for further scholarly exploration and best practice sharing.

### **Implications for Policy**

The EEOC and like-government institutions should consider making anti-corporate gaslighting training mandatory, similar to current mandates requiring employees to undergo anti-sexual harassment training. Longitudinal studies should be done to measure whether anti-corporate gaslighting is affecting the rates of EEOC retaliation claims. By embedding this training into its policies, the EEOC could keep track of important trends, feedback, and best



practices, providing a clear line of sight into any additional policies that may be helpful in thwarting this unwanted workplace behavior.

### **Implications for Scholarship**

As stated previously, there is awareness of the gap in scholarship that has been noted by social scientists regarding social and workplace or corporate gaslighting. The space is entirely open for scholarly exploration and more researchers are continuing to probe and make contributions to alleviate this underrecognized issue.

In fact, Rodrigues et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to evaluate the experiences of women of color in the sciences. They asserted that social isolation, based on being a part of a marginalized group, can lead to internal doubt and confusion due to consistently negative social reinforcement for non-white scientists and engineers (Rodrigues et al., 2021). The researchers indicated that social support between women of color scientists and engineers can combat the negative implications of incessant workplace gaslighting. It is important to note that this qualitative analysis was done on a small scale, with only 15 participants represented.

Small datasets present an issue when trying to substantiate impacts for those who may be reluctant to acknowledge the existence of corporate gaslighting. Interested researchers are encouraged to conduct a larger-scale testing analysis. Scholarly work should lead to next-level expansion of this study. Larger test groups would be useful in proving efficacy and measuring learning transfer. Longitudinal studies should also be explored by researchers. Inquiries such as: *“How does long-term exposure to corporate gaslighting impact the psyche?”* could yield useful results. With focus, awareness, resources, and intentionality, scholarly researchers can expand on this body of work with wide-reaching data and make stronger correlations across the social sciences.

## **Conclusion**

As a learning practitioner within corporate and government institutions, I stand by the need for more specific training to directly address destructive behaviors that are often ignored. With concepts such as microaggressions and unconscious bias training becoming more prevalent in work settings, I believe there is space for corporate gaslighting in the learning curriculum of most organizations. This is only one approach to tackle this issue. Other efforts, such as anonymous feedback boxes, inclusion and equity dialogues, and internal mobility diagnostics are also tactics that can be used to safeguard against corporate gaslighting behavior. Training should accompany and affect action plans – otherwise, its anti-corporate gaslighting principles will not be viewed by employees as an effort that the organization lives by.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Training Slides

Interesting Background on "Gaslighting"

This manipulative, psychologically abusive power dynamic derives its name from the 1939 play "Gaslight." In this classic performance, a husband convinces his wife that she is insane. He does this by suggesting she is visualizing delusions about the gaslight lamps on their street. Gaslighting aligns with its theatrical reference and is aptly defined as a reality - shifting paradigm in which the victim is made to question their thoughts, memories, and events.



Defining Corporate Gaslighting

Corporate Gaslighting: A manipulative, covert psychological tactic used against a targeted individual or group which is repeatedly socially reinforced in the work environment; causing the victim (s) to question their abilities, recollections and in extreme cases, their sanity.

*With multiple research studies examining the dyadic, often familial implications of gaslighting, there is a gap as it relates to information centered on social gaslighting (Adkins, 2019). Social gaslighting occurs when the dynamic takes place in public spaces, such as the workplace.*

*"Gaslighting is primarily a sociological rather than a psychological phenomenon. Gaslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in powerladen relationships. Sociologists need to pay attention."*  
- Dr. Paige Sweet, Harvard University

#### Examples of Corporate Gaslighting

- Isolation – intentionally leaving target employee out of meetings/conversation
- Information Withholding – purposefully withholding information that is necessary for the target employee to complete a task or prepare for discussions
- Diminishment – trivializing and minimizing an employee's concern and workplace reality.
- Subvert Comments – making subversive, triggering statements to an employee in an attempt to provoke an unfavorable reaction.
- Untruths – declaring untruths as facts (i.e., "I sent you the meeting a week ago) with the intent to make the target employee question their reality
- Inequitable social reinforcement – gaining and influencing the "wisdom of the crowd" to substantiate gaslighting claims about the target employee.
- Reality -bending – having extreme variations following discussions or interactions (i.e., "I thought we had a lovely conversation about your high performance" after a bash session)



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Vignette #1 – created by the researcher, Jade Singleton**

Shade is a thirty-four-year-old manager at an insurance firm. One day, when she arrives at the office, her boss, Jim, asks for a meeting. Once she arrives, he impatiently asks her why she did not attend the recent leadership presentation.

Shade remembers that Jim told her that she did not have to join the leadership presentations when she asked last week. She reminds Jim of this. He responds incredulously, “I never said that. You need to be at every leadership presentation. This is the second one that you’ve missed! Shade, you really have to get on the ball.”

When she leaves his office, Shade remembers similar instances of Jim stating one thing and then angrily requesting another. She wonders why he did not contact her to alert her to the leadership presentation if the expectations regarding her attendance had changed.

**What do you think Shade should do?**

**What do you think will happen after Shade takes the action you described?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

**Vignette #2 – created by the researcher Jade Singleton**

Tyler is known as the fun coworker in the office. He is always making jokes and planning get togethers. Stephanie is new to the firm and noticed that some of Tyler's jokes towards her don't seem as fun and light as they are with others. Stephanie also noticed that his comments toward her tend to center on her Latinx culture. One day, with just the two of them in the break room, Tyler casually asked Stephanie how her weekend was. Stephanie replied, "It was great!" Tyler stated, "I'm sure it was, I know how you people like to get together and have big family barbeques! Did some of your cousins come for a visit for some pinata fun – or did you just all hang out and make empanadas?"

This made Stephanie feel targeted, marginalized, and reduced to stereotypes. She decided to talk to Cindy in HR. Cindy called a meeting with Tyler. He stated, "I have no idea what Stephanie is referencing. I simply asked her how her weekend was. I'm sorry if that's offensive."

Cindy elected to close the concern. Tyler then began telling the rest of the team members that Stephanie had gone to HR and reported her for asking how her weekend was. Now, her teammates seem more off standish.

**What do you think Stephanie should do?**

**What do you think will happen after Stephanie takes the action you described?**

**What should Cindy have done?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

**Vignette #3 – created by the researcher, Jade Singleton**

Serena works for a marketing firm that has a high-pressure corporate culture. Their motto is "*Hustle hard and play harder.*" During a happy hour, Serena mentions how burnt out she feels

working 60 hours a week. Her coworkers accuse her of “not thinking positively.” One coworker, Alexandria, even says that if Serena had more success with her accounts – she wouldn’t be complaining about the workload.

Two days later, Serena was pulled into a meeting with management to discuss her lack of enthusiasm. She is told that some people just aren’t cut out to be the best marketers – and that she should consider what she *really* wants for a career.

**What do you think Serena should do?**

**What do you think will happen after Serena takes the action you described?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

**Vignette #4 – created by the researcher, Jade Singleton**

Newly married Juanita is excited to attend her company’s holiday party. Out of the ten years, she’s attended, she has never had a date. Her husband, Jermaine, is equally thrilled. He goes out and buys a tuxedo with touches that are the same maroon color as Juanita’s dress. He knows how important Juanita takes her job at the investment firm and wants to represent her well.

Finally, the day comes! They drive up to the front of the hotel and Jermaine states he needs to run to the restroom and asks Juanita if she wouldn’t mind parking. He hops out, goes to the restroom, and then comes back out to wait for Juanita to enter. While he’s standing there, a gentleman gets out of his vehicle and throws Jermaine his keys. He says, “Look up the tag” as he walks into the building. Jermaine realizes that the man mistook him for a valet.

When Juanita returns, Jermaine explains what happened. They decide to head home. After Jermaine describes the man to Juanita, she realizes the key thrower was her coworker Jim.

The following day, she goes to the office and pulls Jim aside. She says, “Bill, you mistook my husband for a valet at the Christmas party. You threw him your keys. I know you, and I know that you didn’t make this mistake personally – but it was incredibly insensitive. Black people are frequently mistaken for the “help” and its hurtful.”

Jim states, “Wow. That’s really pulling the race card isn’t it? Your husband was standing out front in a tuxedo. Race has nothing to do with it. Please stop with the fake outrage – it’s annoying.”

**What do you think Juanita should do?**

**What do you think will happen after Juanita takes the action you described?**

**What should Bill have done after Juanita approached him?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

#### **Vignette #5 – created by the researcher, Jade Singleton**

Every Tuesday, the engineering team at Theranos has a Happy Hour. Like clockwork, around 4:30, they start packing up and head across the street to the Rockin’ Rooster. John is new to the team and wonders when he’ll receive an invite to attend – but as the weeks roll on, the day never comes.

One day he receives an email from Eric, the leader of the Rockin’ Rooster Happy Hour crew. It says, “Absolutely do not want John at Happy Hour – the guy is as fun as watching paint dry. If any one of you yahoos invites him...you are out too!” He finished the email with a row of laughing emojis. John isn’t sure if Eric meant for him to see the message.

**What do you think John should do?**

**What do you think will happen after John takes the action you described?**

**What should Eric have done?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Guide**

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee** \_\_\_\_\_

Introduction: I will begin by reading you a short story. Following the story, I will ask you a series of questions. Please elaborate and be as descriptive as possible. I will be recording the session and will interject only when necessary to clarify any questions that you may have. When you are responding to the story make sure you are considering the concept of gaslighting behavior. There is a gaslighting component within each story. Your job is to identify what the characters should do and when the gaslighting took place.

### **Sample Questions:**

Here are some sample questions following a gaslighting story.

**What do you think John Doe should do?**

**What do you think will happen after John Doe takes the action you described?**

**What should Jane Doe have done?**

**At what point in this story was gaslighting behavior present? Why?**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Post-Vignette Testing Interview 1**

Thank you for participating in the training session and completing the testing of these brief vignettes. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions based on your professional experience about the technique, content, and overall experience.

1. Were the training objectives clearly identified?
2. Was the content well organized and easy to follow?
3. In a word, how would you describe the training experience?
4. Does this training experience remind you of any others that you may have led, sourced or attended? How so?
5. What was positive about this experience?
6. What were areas of opportunity to improve?

### **Post-Vignette Testing Interview 2**

Thank you for participating in the training session and completing the testing of these brief vignettes. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions based on your professional experience about the technique, content, and overall experience.

1. Would you see this training as a value-add to your organization?
2. What do you think the response would be to this type of training at organizations like yours?
3. What are some of the results that you'd hope to see following this training?
4. How would you measure learning transfer?
5. Who do you believe is the appropriate audience for this training?

## APPENDIX D

### RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Prospective Research Subject: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

#### Project Information

Project Title: Corporate Gaslighting: Can Isolated Training Help?	Project Number:
Site IRB Number:	Sponsor: George Fox University Doctor of Education Program
Principal Investigator: Jade Singleton	Organization: George Fox University
Location: Hillsboro, Oregon	Phone: 808-927-1856
Other Investigators: Scot Headley (Chair)	Organization: George Fox University
Location: Newberg, Oregon	Phone: 503-554-2855

#### 1. PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY

- The purpose of this pilot study is to investigate whether focused employee training, leveraging aggregated pre-published material, would result in successful identification of corporate gaslighting behavior using vignettes.

#### 2. PROCEDURES

**Training Execution:** The training sessions will take place via Zoom and will include a PowerPoint presentation. It is expected that you will attend separate virtual anti-corporate gaslighting training session separately. Following the training presentation, an overview of next steps will be presented.

**Interview for Feedback:** This session will take place one-on-one and be scheduled with you via email. This session will be dedicated to feedback on the training presentation and experience itself and lead into the vignette testing. Testing will be led on a one-on-one basis. I will read the vignette you. You will then speak to the prompting questions following the vignette. I will record each session and listen for coded phrases that indicate understanding and retention of training information.

**Interview for Usefulness:** This session will take place one-on-one and be scheduled with participants via email. This session will be dedicated to usefulness of the training and testing experience and seek feedback



about the potential effectiveness in the participant's respective organization.

**Member Check:** Upon transcription, I, the principle investigator, will provide the copy to you to ensure awareness of the capture and answer any questions. This will be managed via email.

### 3. POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORT

- The minimal risk to you is loss of time.
- The study may provoke work related psychological abuse vignettes.

### 4. OWNERSHIP AND DOCUMENTATION OF SPECIMENS

- All assessment data will be stored the personal computer of the researcher and destroyed after five years.

### 5. POSSIBLE BENEFITS

### 6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- There is no financial compensation for your participation in this research study.

### 7. CONFIDENTIALITY

- Your identity in this study will be treated as confidential. The results of this study, including data, may be published for scientific purposes but will not give your name or include any identifiable references to you.
- However, any records or data obtained as a result of your participation in this study may be inspected by the sponsor, by any relevant governmental agency (e.g., U.S. Department of Education), by the George Fox University Institutional Review Board, or by the persons conducting this study, providing that such inspectors are legally obliged to protect any identifiable information from public disclosure, except where disclosure is otherwise required by law or a court of competent jurisdiction. These records will be kept private in so far as permitted by law.

### 8. TERMINATION OF RESEARCH STUDY

- You have the right to refuse to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without loss of any benefits for which you are already eligible, up until results are published.

### 9. AVAILABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Any further questions you have about this study will be answered by the Principal Investigator:

Name: Jade Singleton  
Phone Number: 202-230-1472

- Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject will be answered by:

Name: Jade Singleton  
email: jadej19@georgefox.edu  
Phone Number: 202.230.1472

### 10. AUTHORIZATION

*I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.*

Participant Name (Printed or Typed):  
Date:

Participant Signature:  
Date:

Principal Investigator Signature:  
Date:

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:  
Date: