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Gaslighting & the Petito Case: Assessing Risk Factors for Law Enforcement

By Scott A. Johnson

Abstract- Psychological abuse can look like many things. It is the tool for abusers and sex offenders to belittle and control their victims. The term "gaslighting" has been used to describe the techniques and process of psychologically controlling and abusing victims. Gaslighting refers to the more serious and extreme form of psychological force/abuse, commonly used by physical abusers, child molesters, human traffickers, and rapists to confuse their victims into believing that the abuse, assault or rape was the victim's fault. The perpetrator uses gaslighting to make their victim appear less credible and appear psychologically unstable. In the same way, the perpetrator makes themselves appear to others as a caring victim of their victim, innocent of any wrongdoing. The recent case of Gabby Petito in Florida (2021) highlights the need for law enforcement and the public to gain understanding of gaslighting and a better understanding of abuse in general.

I will use the term "perpetrator" to refer to the person engaging in gaslighting and psychological abuse/force. Perpetrator includes abusers and sex offenders, some who are psychopaths, some narcissistic, but all dangerous.

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I will use the term "*perpetrator*" to refer to the person engaging in gaslighting and psychological abuse/force. Perpetrator includes abusers and sex offenders, some who are psychopaths, some narcissistic, but all dangerous. The term "*victim*" and "partner" will refer to the person the perpetrator is abusing and gaslighting. Police intervention in domestic abuse situations is imperative. Arrest has powerful impact on slowing-down violent reoffense as does other police interventions.

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I. Psychological Force

Psychological abuse refers to the attacking of someone's self-esteem and self-worth, but the attacks are made against the whole being of the victim. Psychological force, which means psychological strategies used against victims, is the most used type of force in abusive situations as well as by most sex offenders. One of the primary reasons is that psychological force may not always be accurately labeled by others when they witness it, and it is difficult to prove.

Examples provided by Johnson (1995) include:

- Attacking the person's self-worth & self-esteem
- Name-calling
- Put-downs
- Degrading the victim
- Finding things to criticize
- Belittling of accomplishments
- Swearing/ vulgar language directed at the victim
- Using emotions, such as love, against the victim
- The perpetrator implying that they are worth more or more intelligent than the victim
- Placing their own needs over the wellbeing of the victim
- Expressing contempt towards the victim
- Threatening to harm the victim
- Threatening to or destroying the victim's belongings
- Hitting or destroying property
- Threatening to or taking or harming the children or pets
- Monitoring the victim's actions, harassment, stalking
- Withholding and/or controlling the victim's money, including taking money and making the victim buy things for the abuser or pay the abuser's bills
- Interrupting eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Forcing the victim to do anything degrading, humiliating or dangerous
- Criticizing the victim's thoughts, beliefs, or behaviors
- Belittling the victim's accomplishments
- Treating the victim as if inferior or a servant
- Objectifying the victim
- Name calling
- Pressuring into any sexual contact
- Statements such as "*Leaving me proves that you always run away when you fail. If you loved me, you would stay*", or "*if you love me, prove it*".
- Hearing others say: "*that's just the way/she is*" when the perpetrator makes negative comments about the victim- a strong indication that the victim's support network has been compromised.

II. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is perhaps the most severe form of psychological force/abuse. Gaslighting is used by perpetrators of abuse and sex crimes to control others, including by those who are narcissistic and/or psychopath. Narcissism is about characteristics and behaviors that involve a grandiose sense of self (superiority) and the belief that they are special compared to others. They tend to have a constant need for attention and admiration and have a sense of entitlement. The narcissistis exploitive, a user of people, and lacks normal degrees of empathy. They can appear arrogant, misogynistic, and believe they are superior in intelligence (APA, 2013).

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Psychopaths demonstrate callousness, unemotional mindset, and remorselessness. Psychopathy involves patterns of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral characteristics more extreme than *Antisocial Personality Disorder* (Johnson, 2019). The psychopath has a need to hurt others, whether psychologically, physically, sexually, or financially. They can exhibit superficial charm, grandiosity, the need for pathological lying (lying for the sake of lying), are cunning and conning, have limited remorse and empathy, tend to have shallow, limited emotions, and fail to accept responsibility for their behavior. They can be impulsive and exhibit behavioral control problems (Hare, 1991, 2003). For a more in-depth examination of psychopathy, see Johnson (2019). Perpetrators may exhibit psychopathic traits, but not all are true psychopaths.

Psychopaths and narcissists may be abusers and sex offenders, which makes them more proficient in utilizing *gaslighting*.

Psychology Today (2021) defines *gaslighting* as a form of manipulation and control in which a victim is continually led to believe false information to cause the victim to doubt themselves. This impacts the victim's memory, perception of situations, as well as their own sanity. Over time, the victim begins to have doubts about their sanity, self-worth, and of their ability to make decisions.

The goal of the perpetrator of gaslighting is to break the victim- to have the victim experience self-doubt about their sanity and experience doubt about reality, eventually they come to believe whatever the perpetrator says. The perpetrator increases the lies and control over the victim. The lies become more serious, involving sensitive information about the victim. Anything the victim shared with the perpetrator is fair game to use against them.

In the beginning, the perpetrator may shower the victim with positive remarks, kindness, and love. The victim becomes enamored with the perpetrator, often sharing personal information which the perpetrator will use against them. Perina (2017) describes the following five gaslighting tactics used by the psychopath and narcissist-however, these can be used by anyone engaging in gaslighting even if not a psychopath or narcissist:

1. *Confiding in their victim immediately*. This involves revealing personal information about themselves far too early in a relationship and almost always describing themselves as a victim of current and prior partners. This forces the victim to trust too soon and to view the perpetrator as a victim and have sympathy for them. The victim divulges sensitive information far too early in a new relationship. Almost always, however, this information is a lie and used to garner sympathy from the victim.
2. *Repeats private or confidential information*. This information portrays the perpetrator as a victim, constantly *repeating* the information reinforces the details as if they are true. It is as though the perpetrator is a salesman selling their lies. However, remember that "*pathological lying*" is one characteristic of a psychopath. Pathological lying is the relentless need to lie simply for the sheer pleasure it brings the perpetrator.
3. *Either asking few if any personal questions of the victim or very pointed questions of the victim to elicit sensitive and vulnerable information*. This is an important sign of disrespect and control. The perpetrator asks little about their new partner, which typically is what first dates are about. *The lack of interest in the victims' life should be a red flag immediately.* The perpetrator also asks direct questions about the victims/partner's life to eventually use that information against them. However, psychopaths and narcissists are only focused on their own wants and needs and could care less about the wellbeing of their partner and lack any genuine interest in their partner, other than to control and undermine their partner's/ victim's sense of psychological wellbeing.
4. *Askes for special favors*. This is done to test the victim's willingness to comply or to further manipulate the victim into compromising to the perpetrator's wishes and demands. This may involve financial or sexual favors as well. The perpetrator then uses any compromise against the victim when the victim refuses to comply.
5. *Makes odd sides/comments about the victim*. This involves making compliments or criticism or both about the victim's abilities and worth. This is done in private and in front of others, including the victim's family and friends. This takes a toll. The victim hears positive comments followed shortly by criticism. This can cause a state of confusion for the victim. *It is also an ongoing test to assess how easily the victim can be manipulated into debasing thoughts about themselves.* This confusion causes the victim to doubt the perpetrator and the victim is forced to deal with the perpetrator's complementary and kind gestures. This is a form of manipulation and brainwashing.

Tracy (2019) adds several other gaslighting techniques and examples:

1. *Withholding* involves ignoring the victim's conversation or concerns and refusing to reveal any personal reaction or information.
2. *Countering & Trivializing* involves countering the victim's recollection of an event or concerns the

victim may have by telling the victim how wrong they are or were. Basically, the victim says one thing while the perpetrator tries to prove their own point of how the victim is confused. The perpetrator demeans the victim and trivializes the victim's concerns and feelings.

3. *Blocking & diverting* are techniques used by the perpetrator to deflect the discussion to the victim's shortcomings and avoid discussing what the victim wants and needs to discuss- refusing to acknowledge the victim's personhood.
4. *Forgetting and Denial* involves the perpetrator conveniently "forgetting" previous disclosures from the victim and denying previous discussions or promises made orbehavior engaged in.

As a result of psychological abuse and *gaslighting*, the victim may experience fear—of the abuser, of being harmed, or of others finding out about the abuse—as well as feelings of being trapped, worthless and exploited.

a) Breaking the Victim Down

The goal of a perpetrator of gaslighting is to cause the victim to experience psychological stress, doubting their own sanity and competence. The perpetrator uses personal information about the victim against them, belittling and attacking the victim for their perceived faults or negative life experiences. The perpetrator begins to attack the victim's positive qualities and positive life experiences and demeans and minimizing accomplishments. The perpetrator lies, they fail to keep their promises, and will blame the victim for either expecting them to do something or denythat they ever made a promise. Mix this with the perpetrator then portraying the nice, loving partner and the victim is trapped with more confusion. Basically, an extreme form of psychological abuse. The perpetrator also accuses the victim of being crazy despite evidence they are not! This likely results in further confusion of the victim.

b) Telling Lies

Psychopaths and Narcissists have a need to tell lies, just for the sake of conning (*pathological lying*). For the perpetrator of gaslighting, lies are an important weapon. First, to tell stories about their own life to evoke admiration and trust from the victim. Second, the lies conceal the truth about the perpetrator. The reality is that when people tell us something, we hear only their side of the story. Third, the perpetrator denies making requests or promises they blatantly made. Lying for the sake of lying and for the purpose of eventually hurting someone. Over time, the perpetrator of gaslighting, like the psychopath and narcissist, increases the amount and degree of the lies told to the victim.

The lies continue by attacking the victim's credibility. The perpetrator tells the victim to do something, but then criticizes the victim for how they did it, despite likely doing it correctly. Inaddition, the perpetrator accuses the victim of lying about anything, and then uses that against the victim, even though the victim did not lie. The brainwashing continues, attacking the victim with accusations that they are lying and then perhaps treating the victim nicely to play more mind games. The lies may be told to the victim's family and friends, which further embarrasses,confuses, and isolates the victim. In addition, the perpetrator denies that they ever did or said something, leaving the victim more confused and doubting their own sanity.

c) Projection

Another behavior of the perpetrator of gaslighting is to use *projection*. Projection is when a person engages in a behavior they should not have, but then accuses their partner of doing the same thing, even though their partner has not done so. One example is the perpetrator may engage in relationships or sex with others, but then accuse the victim of doing the same thing, even when the victim did not. This is an effective tactic for the perpetrator to avoid being held accountable for their actions and make the victim increasingly more confused. The perpetrator may accuse the victim of inappropriate behavior in front of their friends and family, which places even more stress and confusion on the victim, further straining the relationships with friends and family. Basically, the perpetrator accuses everyone else of lying but themselves, even when the evidence proves otherwise. Imagine the impact on the victim of always being called a liar when in fact they are not lying or continually being accused of things they did not do.

d) Assault on the Victims Support Network

Not too long into the relationship, the perpetrator often either bonds with the victim's friends andfamily or pushes the victim's support system away. If the perpetrator bonds with the victims' support network, the main goal is to outwardly portray themselves as a "nice guy", perhaps even portraying themselves as a "rescuer" to the victim. In this case scenario, the perpetrator highlights to others how feeble or mentally unstable the victim is, despite this all being based on lies. The ultimate goal of the perpetrator is to gain the trust of the victim's support network which allows them to increase the verbal, physical and sexual abuse of the victim. When the victim's friends or family begin to doubt the victim's sanity or credibility, the victim has nowhere to go for help. The victim's support network may believe the perpetrator over the victim, giving the perpetrator even more power over the victim. This is a significant sign of gaslighting and of a psychopath.

What is more commonly seen is that the perpetrator increasingly causes conflict between the victim and their support network. This often occurs rapidly in the relationship. The ultimate goal is to isolate and control the victim. The perpetrator demands that the

victim terminate all contact with loved ones and focus exclusively on them. The perpetrator often insults and demeans the victim's friends and family and demands that the victim spend all their time and money on the perpetrator. Jealousy is often aggressively displayed until the victim cuts ties with everyone except the perpetrator.

In either of the two above scenarios, the perpetrator at times expresses loving behavior mixed with anger and control. The victim's support network finds it difficult to communicate with the victim. In general, in contact with the victim's family and friends, the perpetrator expresses concern about the victim's behavior and portrays the victim as the primary problem. Conversely, while in front of the victim's family and friends, the perpetrator often accuses the victim of things they did not do, portraying the victim as lying or delusional or emotionally unstable (e.g., they have OCD, depression, substance abuse issues- though not true). This places the victim in an emotional turmoil of wanting to defend themselves, angry and shamed about the accusations, the victim appears more unstable as they try to defend themselves. In essence the victim now appears to be the unstable one, even though they are not.

e) Sexual Gaslighting

The perpetrator may be adept at the use of psychological abuse to control consenting and nonconsenting sex partners, which often involves "*gaslighting"* to make their partners/victims question their own sanity and role in a rape. I will use the term "rape" to include sexual assault,rape, child molestation, any forced sexual contact.

It is common for a sex offender to blame the victim for the sexual assault, molestation, or rapewhile at the same time portraying themselves as a victim of the situation. Perpetrators often claim that they were "*out-of-control*" or "*mislead"* by the victim, neither of which are true. *Sexual gaslighting* is a form of psychological abuse used to rape, to gain unwanted sexual contact. Wahl (2017) describes *sexual gaslighting* as an attempt to cause confusion around a sexual situation. We hear this often occurring in sexual assaults and rapes. The victim may have been unconscious, impaired, or simply not wanting the sexual contact to occur. The perpetrator attempts to confuse the victim by questioning the victim's intent and accusing the victim of really wanting the sexual contact, when in fact they did not. If the victim was intoxicated, drugged, or unconscious when the sexual contact/rape occurred, the victim is likely to struggle with the perpetrator's lies and blaming statements. In addition, when the victim is in an impaired state or unconscious, others may not believe them. The goal is to cause confusion in the victim by challenging victim resistance as consent or as a sign that they do not love the perpetrator.

This can lead to the victim, as already discussed above, to distrust their own experience and memory. This can also result in a victim appearing more confused and unreliable in their recollection of the sexual assault or rape. But that is the very reason the perpetrator engages in *sexual gaslighting*. This has been discussed by numerous researchers as psychological force and is used by sex offenders to justify their behavior. The term *gaslighting*, in my opinion, helps to understand this type of force as a more extreme and effective form of abuse.

Unfortunately, many people hold false beliefs about sexual assault and rape. Many blame the victims of sex crimes or abuse as somehow being the victim's fault. This makes the perpetrators actions even more of an effective weapon. Consider the following about *sexual gaslighting*, as research demonstrates about sexual assault and rape.

Johnson (1995) conducted a study involving over 2,000 Minnesota high school students who were surveyed following a two-day presentation on sexual assault, rape, and child molestation. The results indicated that up to 75% of the males and up to 38% of the females endorsed that they condoned the use of psychological force by a male to obtain sexual contact from a female incertain circumstances. Up to 4% of the males and 2% of the females condoned the use of physical force by a male to gain sexual contact from a female. In that same study, Johnson also surveyed 115 convicted sex offenders who were currently on probation and currently involved in outpatient sex offender treatment. The goal was to compare with the responses of the high schoolstudents and convicted sex offenders about types of force used to justify forced sexual contact.

The sex offenders indicated that they used psychological force (13-48%) more than physical force (22%). These findings suggest that adolescents and sex offenders hold beliefs that condone the use of psychological force to gain sexual contact and that the convicted sex offenders primarily utilized psychological force in the commission of their sex crimes.

Johnson (1997, 1998, 2011) conducted a study comparing the types of force used by sex offenders who were in the *community* (on probation and currently involved in outpatient sex offender treatment) with *incarcerated* sex offenders (who were in Minnesota prisons and currently involved in sex offender treatment). Both groups utilized primarily psychological force and some physical force in the commission of their sex crime. Interestingly, the incarcerated sex offenders utilized a slightly higher degree of psychological force than their community counterparts. However, 100% of the sex offenders in both groups utilized psychological force and approximately up to 21% also used physical force.

Perpetrators are adept at blaming their victim as well as their alcohol use for their violent behavior. Time and time perpetrators of violent crime use alcohol intoxication as an excuse for reprehensible behavior (e.g., Critchlow, 1986). Female victims who are intoxicated are often lessbelieved and often portrayed as deserving of the rape in some way (Harrison, Howerton, Secarea, & Nguyen, 2008; Wenger & Bornstein, 2006). As a contradiction, sex offenders and offenders in general who are intoxicated at the time they commit their crime are often portrayed as being less culpable for their actions (Qi, Starfelt, & White, 2016). Interesting situation- blame the victim and support the offender. Stone (2013) provides an interesting legal opinion on this matter. There is a direct association between men's attitudes about women (e.g., misogyny, use of coercion, misinterpretation of women's behavior) and sexual assault and rape in general (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). When the victim of *gaslighting* is interviewed, he/she likely appears to be a mess- distraught, depressed, angry, yet the perpetrator often appears blaming andcalm, too calm.

Research has found that perpetrator sobriety plays no role in the degree of rape victim injuries (Abbey, Clinton, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2002). Others (e.g., Testa, 2002) suggest that perpetrators who are more violent may drink more on the rape day and may also be sociopathic, though that does not imply what degree of intoxication the perpetrator had at the time of the offense, only that they were drinking that day. Whether intoxicated or sober, the perpetrator planned the rape, maintained control over the victim, completed the rape, and successfully escaped afterwards. Many perpetrators blame alcohol use for their violent behavior.

How these findings relate to gaslighting is simple. Psychological force is the most used force against victims of domestic/relationship violence as well as against victims of sex crimes. There appears to be an attitude of acceptance for the use of psychological force to gain sexual contact, which makes it more likely that 1) an offender would rely on psychological abuse to manipulate their victim and 2) that this acceptance of psychological force makes it more difficult for victimsto be fully supported and believed (*see Johnson, 2014 for an explanation of attribution theory and how victims are often held more responsible for being raped than perpetrators; extrapolate for how others may be conned by the perpetrator of gaslighting to blame the victim as well and to cause others to question the mental wellbeing and credibility of the victim*).

Personality factors have been correlated to violence in general, including sex crimes. Those with personality traits including, but not limited to narcissism, antisocial, psychopathic and other deviant traits may simply not be concerned with the risks involved in violent crime. In addition, such individuals may give little if any regard to the consequences or punishments for their behavior (Strang & Peterson, 2013; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003). Those who engage in the more severe form of psychological abuse of *gaslighting* appear more likely to present with psychopathic traits: high degrees of cunningness, being able to calmly con others (lie, manipulate- even towards law enforcement), and their apparent lower degree of anxiety or fear expressed when others are present.

f) Non-Verbal Cues

Victims of psychopaths or narcissists often experience a feeling that something is off, that the perpetrator exhibits cruel behavior, cruel comments, and just a bad feeling. But when the victim is getting to know the perpetrator, they have good intentions and may ignore the warning signs (Perina, 2017). For law enforcement, there is a sense that the perpetrator, or alleged perpetrator, appears too calm, joking, and projecting of blame onto the victim. The perpetrator appears to not demonstrate an affective or behavioral response that would be normally experienced. An innocent or guilty perpetrator generally demonstrate anger and anxiety, but do not appear too calm as the psychopath or narcissist.

When the perpetrator is confronted by the victim or others:

(a) They often deflect responsibility, blaming the victim for their own (perpetrator's) shortcomings or role in the problem, despite the victim likely having minimal if any rolein the problem at hand.

(b) They often become verbally and physically abusive, blaming the victim for not agreeing with them or blaming the victim for "*causing*" them to yell, assault, and/or rape.

III. How to Identify Gaslighting

Below are some indicators that suggest gaslighting has likely occurred. Family, friends, law enforcement, child protection, probation officers may observe the following *(though not an exhaustive list*). Some overlap and are a bit redundant, but each are important.

1. *Context:* The victim is hysterical but offender calm, lacking concern normally expected in situation- too calm, rarely may be overly angry. If the partner is genuinely concerned about their partner's situation and mental state, they should demonstrate concern. For officers, never forget why you responded to the call, what was alleged? When the allegedperpetrator is too calm, belittling the victim, blaming the victim, and portraying themselves as an innocent victim of their alleged victim- that does not fit the expected context of attitude and behavior. Why is one person upset or distraught and the other calm? Even guilty suspects may demonstrate concern for their victim's response to the assault/ abuse/rape.

2. *Befriending the officer, Child Protection Worker, or victim's family and friends:* In a law enforcement contact, it is expected that a person experiences some degree of anxiety and at times anger, but in moderation. Someone who appears too calm or too angry is generally not the victim. Victims may appear confused, scared, upset, but these same observations are not made of the perpetrator. Being overly friendly is a concern because it is not normal to remain calm during a law enforcement contact, or in a crisis situation. Being able to befriend the officer or others is an indicator that the perpetrator has psychopathic traits-especially traits of being cunning, conning, lacking normal emotional or empathetic responses, and demonstrating a lack of concern for the consequences- it is simply a game for the perpetrator.
3. *Laughing off concerns/minimizing the situation:* The ability to minimize the seriousness of a psychologically, physically, or sexually violent situation demonstrates psychopathic traits. Only a guilty individual would do so. An innocent person, accused of such a wrongdoing would likely experience anxiety, anger and fear of being wrongfully held accountable or accused.
4. *Portraying concern for the victim but appearing calmer than expected:* Again, if the victim is mentally distressed, yet the perpetrator is calm, making jokes, or blaming the victim, they are not demonstrating appropriate concern but rather that of a guilty perpetrator with psychopathic traits.
5. *Blaming the victim:* It is common for perpetrators of abuse, rape, and gaslighting to attack the victim. This may involve many areas of the victim's life. For example:

   a. *Mental health*: Telling others that the victim has a mental health diagnosis, yet no one in the victim's family or friend network is aware that the victim has any mental health disorder. It is common to claim that the victim is depressed, bipolar, has OCD, substance abuse, and that the victim is the psychologically or physically assaultive person, not the accused perpetrator. Again, context matters as discussed above. In many cases, the family and friends of the victim have never witnessed the psychological concerns or when they have noticed the concerns, everything appeared to begin when the victim and perpetrator began dating.

   b. *Temper:* Blaming the victim of being the one who is aggressive is a common claim by the perpetrator. The victim of gaslighting has experienced ongoing verbal and likely physical and sexual attacks. The victim is constantly bombarded with the perpetrator being nice and loving at other times and then psychologically mean or cruel. So yes, the victim appears psychologically stressed and angry, confused, and may well have acted in an aggressive manner following the powerful gaslighting that has occurred. However, the victim's response would be considered normal given the ongoing gaslighting.

   c. *Depression/Bipolar:* As mentioned above, the victim is likely depressed- victims naturally become depressed. In most situations, however, the depression began after the relationship with the perpetrator began. However, likely no official diagnosis has ever been given. Many victims never seek help or if they attempt to do so are stopped by the perpetrator of gaslighting to avoid detection or the perpetrator may support the victim obtaining mental health services and portray to the mental health professional that the victim is the one with the problem. Again, family and friends of the victim can attest to when the mental health concerns did not begin (if are even present) until after the relationship with the perpetrator began.

6. *Projecting blame onto the victim, justifying their own behavior as somehow normal or caring in nature:* perpetrators of abuse, sexual assault, rape, and of course, gaslighting are adept at blaming the victim for anything that occurs that draws attention. Likely, again, the perpetrator of gaslighting remains much calmer than expected in the situation and may even laugh-off/minimize their involvement in the problem at hand. In addition, the perpetrator likely attacks the victim based on personal information the victim disclosed. Using things against the victim is an ongoing problem, an attack on the trust and vulnerability of the victim, which may result in the victim experiencing more guilt and shame about their own history that the perpetrator is using against them.
7. *Identify when the victim allegedly developed any personal problems:* Usually the alleged problems began after the dating relationship with the perpetrator began. Again, the victim's family and friends are likely to have not noticed said problems until the dating relationship began.

a) Identifying if You or a Friend Are Being or Have Been a Victim of Gaslighting

Identifying if you have been or are being gaslighted is difficult. No one wants to admit they wereor are a victim. However, identifying if you have been or are a victim of gaslighting or any type of abuse is the first step to getting yourself to safety and improving your mental wellbeing. Some of the indicators include the following, *especially if these begin when in a new relationship or worsen in a relationship*:

1. constantly second-guessing yourself
2. experiencing self-doubt or depressive symptoms

3. questioning if you are crazy or too sensitive or often questioning your decisions
4. avoiding bringing-up certain topics or issues out of fear of how your partner may react
5. isolating you from family, friends, support people
6. not engaging in usual activities
7. feeling like you are not your usual self (e.g., less assertive, less outgoing, more sad, less confident, less social)
8. withholding information about your relationship or partner from your family and friends
9. lying to others to survive and to not appear unstable
10. allowing your partner to make decisions for you
11. not feeling safe or confident to stand up for yourself or express your wants or needs
12. apologizing for your views, wants, or needs
13. defending your partner to others when you know your partner is wrong
14. making excuses for your partner's abusive behavior (psychological, physical, and/orsexual abuse/rape)
15. questioning your worth as a partner, person, or parent

b) Leaving a Gaslighter or Any Abusive Relationship

It is important to understand that leaving an abuser is challenging and difficult. Regardless of how severe the abuse, whether just beginning or having occurred for some time, there are safety considerations. Leaving an abusive relationship can be dangerous. Abusers, especially those who gaslight or engage in psychical and/or sexual abuse, may become more dangerous and homicidal when they learn about the victim's intent to leave. Here are some of the most important things tokeep in mind for victims:

1. Talk with others about your concerns and your plan to leave. Utilize any and all support networks you have available- family, friends, victim advocates, police. If you are isolated, please, please, please utilize services for battered women/men, advocates for sexual assault/rape victims, and the police. Never go it alone. You deserve support- yoursafety is the most important thing.
2. Take your cell phone and computer.
3. Have any important papers you need. This includes your driver's license, social securitycard, passport, bank cards, etc. Take everything with you. Assume that you may not get another opportunity to retrieve your belongings.
4. Leave when the abuser is gone, at work, out with friends, whatever, so that you can safelyleave.
5. Have support people with you as you leave in case the abuser returns. Utilize the police for protection- they will help you leave with your belongings.
6. If you have a shared bank account, transfer money into a new account that the abuser does not know about or have access to. You can always return money later if you took more than you should have, but it will be very difficult to get the money once you leave.
7. Terminate contact with the abuser. Utilize an email or letter or another person to tell them you are leaving- after you leave! The abuser, especially one who gaslights, is very able toconvince you to meet and to rekindle your relationship. Cease contact.
8. Do not tell the perpetrator where you are going or living.
9. Inform your support network, including your coworkers of the situation so that they are aware and can provide more protection should the abuser show up at your home or workor friend's or family's home.
10. Never, ever, under any circumstance, meet the abuser to discuss why you left or have further communication. This almost always ends badly with further assault, rape, or murder. The abuser will try to demonstrate love and concern, only to harm you once you are alone together. If a meeting is necessary, never do it alone and keep the meeting in a public place, during the daytime, and again, with a support person/s. Meeting in front of apolice station offers more protection because there are always security cameras. Let the police know about the situation in advance so that if you need to call 911, they already have information. Preferably, never meet again with the abuser.
11. If you need to meet with the abuser for a legitimate reason other than getting backtogether, do so with others present, in front of a police station if possible.
12. Report them to the police if they continue to contact you or show up where you are at. Remember, if they truly loved you, they would not have abused you in the first place They should want you to move on and be happy. If they continue to contact you, that is abuse and control and gaslighting- it is also harassment and stalking.
13. It is always ok to say "*I love you, but this relationship is toxic*". It is understandable that you may have positive memories and believe that the abuser has some good qualities. However, once they began to abuse you, the relationship is over. Move on.
14. Contact local or national helplines/centers for domestic abuse (Domestic Violence Support | The National Domestic Violence Hotline (thehotline.org)

What the literature has to Say About Police Intervention in Cases of Domestic Violence Law enforcement often takes the blame for their intervention in domestic violence situations. They cannot prevent a future violent situation and cannot force a victim to leave an abusive relationship. In fact, most victims return to the abusive relationship for many reasons, some of which may include shame and guilt, loss of self-esteem, self-doubt about who is responsible forthe abuse, and of course, because they have been abused long enough to

defer to the perpetrator for any place of blame and decision making.

It is common for officers to separate perpetrators and victims. At times this may be the only option if an arrest is not made. When officers separate the victim and perpetrator, especially for 1-3 days, is more likely to result in increased anger and rage by the perpetrator. Remember that most victims return to their abusers. The perpetrator is aware that the victim will likely return, and the perpetrator can gaslight again, appearing loving and then increasing the degree of abuse,up to and including murder.

The research demonstrates that the victim leaving the relationship or separating from the perpetrator can be the most dangerous time. More serious violence and even lethal violence ismore likely to occur during or shortly following a period of separation (e.g., Campbell, 1995;Campbell et al., 2003; Dunkley & Phillips, 2015; Logan & Walker, 2004; McFarlane et al., 1999).

Whether the perpetrator of abuse is arrested or not appears to have mixed results. Several studies demonstrated that arrest decreased the subsequent abuse for up to the follow-up period of approximately six months (Berk & Newton, 1985; Maxwell, Garner, & Fagan, 2001; Schmidt &Sherman, 1993; Sherman Berk, 1984; Wooldredge, 2007) with at least one finding that a longer period of incarceration (hours to days) is more effective (e.g., Sherman & Berk, 1984).

Others found that police intervention *with or without* arrest decreased reoffense within the follow-up period(Berk et al., 1982; Maxwell et al., 2001; Tolman & Weisz, 1995).

Some found that police intervention (*other than arrest*) made more of a difference on subsequentabuse (Hirschel & Hutchison, 1992; Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliot, 2006; Hoppe et al, 2020; Maxwell, Garner, & Fagan, 2001; Schmidt & Sherman; 1993) although some studies include more chronic abusers who may be less responsive to any police intervention or incarceration.

One issue that may have impacted studies on the impact of arrest is that approximately 40% of the perpetrators of abuse left the scene prior to police arriving (Buzawa, & Hirschel, 2009; Dunford, 1990; Feder, 1996; Hirschel & Hutchison, 1992:894). This may have impacted the overall studies because arrest may have been delayed or in some cases not occurred because the offender was not on scene. It has been found that perpetrators of abuse who leave the scene priorto the arrival of the police are more dangerous and more likely to reoffend (Buzawa et al., 1999).

c) *Caveats for the literature Reviews on Police Arrest and Impact on Subsequent Violence/Reoffense for Domestic Violence*

Problems in the above studies and in the current literature appear worthy of mention. The problems related to the operational definitions of abuse; not always clearly specifying the follow-up period; and not clearly defining reoffense. Perhaps the most significant issue, that arrest versus no arrest is not a measure of whether abuse ends, but rather does it delay reoffense, which allows the victim to obtain support to address the abuse and protect themselves. It appears that arrest does not end domestic abuse, which was never the intent of arrest. However, even in the above studies, there is support that arrest appears to delay reoffense which allows the victim more time to seek help.

The issue of arrest/no arrest is complex because there are numerous other factors to consider, (e.g., see Broidy, et al., 2016). The research also presents with limitations in that not all incidents of domestic abuse are reported or reported in a timely manner, including subsequent acts of violence. This may suggest that the overall percentage of perpetrator reoffense is underreported. In addition, failing to arrest likely emboldens the perpetrators as they have no serious consequence for their violent behavior. It also decreases the likelihood of the victim calling the police on subsequent abuse events. Arrest gives the perpetrator and victim of domestic abuse the message that domestic abuse is serious and not tolerated. It is not nor has it ever been the case in the mental health field that arrest, in and of itself, ends abuse.

IV. Case Example- Gabby Petito

I will use the most recent televised example of gaslighting that involves the murder of Gabby Petito. Please see the following news clips to appreciate the point as well as other footage available from television coverage (WATCH: Police Body-Cam Footage of Missing 22 Year-Old Gabby Petito and 'Person of Interest' Fiancé Prior to Disappearance (msn.com); Gabby Petito: New bodycam footage offers details of what police were told about a domestic dispute with fiancé Brian Laundrie - CNN; Bodycam footage raises more questions about missing woman (cnn.com);

The officers who made the traffic stop based on a 911 caller's witnessing Brian physically assaulting Gabby missed important clues that Brian demonstrate psychopathic traits, this is a training issue for officers. However, the officers interrogating Gabby as the primary perpetrator missed her appearance as being distraught and the victim. They also missed that Brian was far too calm and jovial when questioned by the officers, and even took a sigh when the officer toldhim he was not the primary perpetrator and not going to jail- this further emboldened Brian, a clue of psychopathic traits.

Here is my breakdown of some of the missed important behavioral indicators (though only a summary):

1. A caller to 911 indicated that he witnessed Brian physically assaulting Gabby. This should have guided the officers to approach Brian more assertively and to assume that hedid in fact assault her. This is the context that begins the contact with police.
2. The alleged victim, Gabby, appears as a victim, not a perpetrator of violence, based onher appearance and attitude. She is more than cooperative with police, and like any domestic abuse victim, accepts blame for the incident and protects the perpetrator. Sheassumed responsibility and blame for the entire incident.
3. When questioned about slapping Brian, she appears confused, dazed, and unsure about her comments. This response and appearance is typical of most victims, not most perpetrators. It now appears likely that he took her cell phone and that is when she slapped him to get the phone back. It is against the law to take someone's cell or home phone to prevent them from calling 911. Not sure if that was the situation, but some information suggests it that he took her cell phone. He had his cell in his pocket.
4. As Gabby described the situation, she blames herself because Brian was telling her toshut-up, and she quickly assumed the blame claiming she has OCD. Nothing justifies violence, Brain should have walked away even if she would not "shut-up".
5. Gabby claims that she slapped him for yelling at her, and that he grabbed her arms and bythe jaw, causing noticeable injury to her face.
6. Gabby's appearance appeared appropriate for a victim of recent assault- distraught, crying, unable to focus, and taking the blame for another's actions. Even most important, she appeared to look through the officers. She appeared confused and out-of-it, stressed, and fearful. Officers' forceful questions of her being the primary perpetrator, appearing to prompt her to admit she slapped Brian first and then minimizing his grabbing her arm and jaw, is of significant concern. The officers were blaming of Gabby when they should have been asking more gentle questions for details, not accusing her. Remember that this began with a 911 caller who witnessed Brian slapping her.
7. It is common for abusers, especially the more severe perpetrators who appear to present with psychopathic traits, to instigate their victim into initiating a physical assault in order to portray the victim as the aggressor and then being able to justify physically assaulting or killing their victim. And even if Gabby did first slap Brian, his response of grabbing her arms and jaw (again, visible injury) was a gross over-reaction to being slapped. She isa small stature female, likely not causing any harm with her slap.

Interview with Brian

1. Again, the situation began with a 911 caller who witnessed Brian slapping and verbally berating Gabby.
2. Brian's demeanor was out-of-context for the situation. One would expect him to be upset, confused about why she slapped him, perhaps somewhat angry if he were the actual victim of the situation. His appearance and attitude, however, were far too calm. In fact, he is smiling and overly cooperative with officers, conning the officers to lighten-up and befriend him. They treated Brian not as a suspect of assault/abuse, but rather as the victim. Only a person with psychopathic traits is capable of going from a negative and violent emotional state to a calm, friendly state. He also lacked empathy or compassion for Gabby- his alleged loved one. In situations where the alleged perpetrator may have actually been the victim, one would expect that he would be upset and confused about sheassaulted him and concerned about her as well- neither of which were observed in the body-camera footage.
3. Brian stated that he did not want her to leave when she attempted to leave the situation, and then claimed that he did not have a cell phone and that he would be stranded. Interestingly, however, he produces his cell phone. This was a direct lie to the officers, yet neither officer appears to take note. In addition, it was never clarified or questionedwhether he took her cell phone.
4. The van belonged to gabby. If she wanted to leave, Brian did in fact have a cell phone and financial means to separate, as evident in paying for his hotel when officers askedthem to separate.
5. Throughout the police interaction with Brian, he significantly minimized the seriousness of the situation, failed to acknowledge any fear for his safety at the hands of Gabby, only that he did not want to be kicked out of the van without any means to call anyone becausehe claimed he did not have a cell phone- which again was a lie. Brian appeared relaxed with officers, unconcerned about Gabby's wellbeing, and in fact blamed her for the situation, portraying himself as the victim, which again should have been challenged because of the 911 caller's witnessing Brian as the aggressor.
6. Brain appears to take a sigh and relax more after officers told him that Gabby was theperpetrator and likely the one to go to jail, not him. Though one could understand a perpetrator or victim being relieved about not being the primary suspect, he did not defend Gabby.

V. Overall Petito Case Analysis

The officers' missed obvious indicators that Brian was the suspect in the assault and missed that

Gabby was terrified, confused, and appearing to be the victim of both physical abuse and psychological terrorism (psychological abuse and the extreme of gaslighting). This suggests that the officers were not trained about the impact of psychological abuse nor of the extreme of gaslighting.

The officers appeared to be conned by Brian from the beginning. Any professional can be misled or fooled by an abuser with psychopathic traits (cunning, conning, minimal emotionality, being able to turn-on and turn-off emotions, and the skill to make their victim appear the aggressor- though not overly concerned about it). Gabby's appearance and attitude was that of a victim of extreme abuse and control. She would have confessed to any allegation the officer accused her of. She was unable to think clearly, she was obviously confused and distraught (again, not the appearance or demeanor of a perpetrator), and again the focus should have been on the 911 caller's observations. Brian did a great job of guiding the situation, causing Gabby to confess toinstigating it, when she likely reached the end of her coping skills with his berating and threatening behavior.

Later, the is evidence of prior violent episodes by Brain, one in a café, and others against Gabby. In hindsight, the responding officers would not likely have this knowledge at the point in time they were at the scene.

When a victim, even if portrayed as the perpetrator, takes the blame for most/or all of everything leading up to a violent situation, appear distraught, confused, and protecting of the perpetrator, should be a red flag to extreme victimization. Regardless of whether a victim initiates a physical altercation, that does not justify the victim/perpetrator engaging in more force than what had originally occurred. A slap does not justify grabbing her jaw.

Gaslighting creates a situation where the victim appears unstable and often appears to be the perpetrator- at least from the perpetrators' view. Officers need more training on how victims react to abuse and of the more extreme form of psychological abuse- gaslighting. The arrest of Brian Laundrie may have been the most appropriate intervention given that eyewitnesses viewed him assaulting her and she had injury to her face as a result. Imagine that if an arrest was made, Petito would still be alive, though likely he would have killed her at a later date.

VI. Summary

Psychological abuse and the more extreme form of gaslighting are the most dangerous unseen types of abuse and control over any victim of relational violence. It is imperative that law enforcement be trained to understand what the effects of gaslighting look like in a victim. Also, how the perpetrator appears calmer and more unaffected by the police interaction is indicative of psychopathic traits, including the ability to portray the victim as the perpetrator and as mentally unstable. For law enforcement, pay attention to the alleged perpetrator's behavior, attitude, demeanor- is it appropriate to the situation at hand? If not, this is likely a more seriously violent offender with psychopathic traits. A victim who appears highly distraught, unable to focus, and accepting blame for the violence is likely the genuine victim of the circumstance. Arrest of the perpetrator appears to delay violence reoffense in the short-run.

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