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Some Reflections on Gaslighting and Language Games

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Abstract

This paper proposes that, in many cases, conversational norms permit gaslighting when socially subordinate speakers report systemic injustice. Section 1 introduces gaslighting and the kinds of cases on which I focus—namely, cases in which multiple people gaslight. I give examples and statistics to suggest that these cases are common in response to reports of race- or gender-based injustice; and I appeal to scholarship on epistemologies of ignorance to suggest that this kind of gaslighting is common because it is systematically produced by dominant epistemic systems. Section 2 draws on Lynne Tirrell’s account of language games that’ve been influenced by oppression to make the case that conversational norms make gaslighting “appropriate” when socially subordinate speakers report systemic injustice. Together, these points make the case that the kind of gaslighting discussed in this paper (i) occurs systematically and (ii) is mutually reinforcing with systems of ignorance. The discussion is meant to help us understand and address the conditions that make gaslighting commonplace. If it’s true that gaslighting occurs systematically in part thanks to our warped conversational norms, then we may be able to mitigate the prevalence of gaslighting by attending to these norms.

Keywords: gaslighting, language games, oppression, epistemic gaslighting

Introduction

Gaslighting is a kind of abuse that is both manipulative and epistemically damaging. In paradigmatic examples of gaslighting, a man in a heterosexual romantic couple manipulates his partner and her environment in ways that prompt her to doubt her own perceptions, thoughts, and epistemic standing. In Kate Abramson’s influential account, she distinguishes gaslighting from other types of abuse by appealing to gaslighters’ goals or intentions. For instance, she says a gaslighter tries “(consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy” (Abramson 2014, 2). And she gives the following sufficient condition:

We all need interpersonal confirmation, especially in difficult situations. And when the interpersonal confirmation is refused, or deliberately thwarted, precisely in order to radically undermine someone's sense of standing to protest bad conduct, it's gaslighting. (Abramson 2014, 6)

Others writing on gaslighting have deemphasized gaslighters' psychologies and focused more on paradigmatic gaslighting behaviors or on what gaslighting does to those who suffer it. For instance, here's how Rachel McKinnon introduces *epistemic gaslighting*:

I'm interested in the more subtle form [of gaslighting], often unintentional, where a listener doesn't believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker's testimony. In this epistemic form of gaslighting, the listener of testimony raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately. Directly, or indirectly, then, gaslighting involves expressing doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claims. (McKinnon 2017, 168)

McKinnon allows that epistemic gaslighting may be unintentional, and she characterizes it instead in terms of the sorts of situations in which it arises and how gaslighters behave in those situations. In the relevant situations, the subject of epistemic gaslighting is reporting a harm or injustice. In McKinnon's paradigm case, Victoria is mispronounced by a colleague, James, and she complains about it to their mutual colleague, Susan. In situations like this, the gaslighter raises doubts either about the injustice reported or about the victim's ability to perceive events accurately. In McKinnon's example, these occur when Susan responds to Victoria's complaints as follows.

Susan: "I'm sure you just misheard him: you're on edge and expect to hear mispronouncing. I just don't believe that James would do that. He won a university diversity award for his supporting queer issues, after all. Besides, he's been a supporter of yours in the past too. He really is your ally." (McKinnon 2017, 168)

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky also allows that gaslighting can be either intentional or unintentional, and he develops distinct conditions for each. His account of *unintentional gaslighting* characterizes it according to the kinds of actions that are

apt to make someone doubt her perceptions, whether or not those actions actually have the relevant effects.

Unintentional gaslighting: Gaslighting occurs when (i) a speaker uses words *without* the intention that a hearer come to form negative attitudes toward her own interpretive abilities, but (ii) the use of such words is apt to cause the hearer to form such attitudes (iii) owing to the hearer being subject to systemic epistemic injustice that has disposed her to do so. (Podosky 2021, 211)

Moreover, it's worth noting that although he doesn't make it an explicit part of his account, Podosky's examples also begin with a report of injustice. Indeed, Podosky's account of what makes unintentional gaslighting apt to make someone doubt her perceptions seems to turn on the relevant perceptions being such that they inform a report of systemic injustice:

Consider the case . . . where the woman testifies to being deliberately brushed up against by a man in the office, and her colleague responds, "John isn't the kind of guy to act inappropriately at work." In a society that systematically fails to treat the testimony of women seriously when it comes to allegations of sexual harassment (and sexual assault) . . . [t]he tendency of members of society to disbelieve women when such allegations are made disposes women to doubt their own experience involving sexual harassment. (211)

The colleague's behaviors are apt to induce doubt because behaviors like his occur systematically in specific situations—namely, *when women report sexual abuses*.

In this article, I focus on cases of gaslighting that closely resemble those described by McKinnon and Podosky: a speaker reports a systemic injustice, and others then raise unwarranted doubts about the report and/or the reporter. In the paradigm cases on which I focus, however, there are multiple gaslighters. I use "normative gaslighting" to refer to such cases. For my purposes, it won't matter whether we think of these as cases of *collective* gaslighting or as multiple instances of one individual gaslighting another.¹ I take it that both of these occur, and each can

¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to be clearer about these possibilities and for suggesting helpful ways to navigate the discussion of them.

motivate my ultimate point: that dominant conversational norms give speakers warrant to gaslight in response to reports of systemic injustice.²

Although my focus differs from Abramson's, she nonetheless provides three examples of what I have in mind. In one, a philosophy graduate student tries to explain to other graduate students why she felt "ostracized or ignored because of [her] gender," and they respond by raising doubts about her interpretations of events (Abramson 2014, 5). In another, an undergraduate says she's concerned about racism in her community, and those who hear her say she's being too sensitive. In a third, a gay junior academic finds herself in circumstances in which it's reasonable for her to fear that she'll be fired for her sexual orientation, and when she tells her colleagues, they dismiss her fears (4–5).

Prima facie, these are instances of gaslighting because of the kinds of behaviors that the gaslighters engage in—setting aside whatever intentions they had. Following McKinnon, I take it that gaslighters needn't *intend* to discredit a person or her claims; rather, they need only to express unwarranted "doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claims."³ Thus, I also follow McKinnon in taking it that gaslighting occurs when a speaker reports a harm or injustice. And like Podosky, I take it that in the relevant cases, gaslighting may be apt to make someone doubt her perceptions because it is perpetrated systematically. We can tie some of these points together as follows: In cases of normative gaslighting, the injustice that the speaker is testifying to is one that *targets* members of oppressed or subordinate groups. In McKinnon's (2017, 168) case, it's transphobic mispronouncing; in Podosky's, it's sexual harassment. Since members of oppressed or subordinate groups are systematically targeted for harm and injustice, when one reports such a harm or injustice, one is reporting an instance

² My view on conversational norms is clarified in section 2, but for now, let it suffice to say that they're the rules that distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate conversational contributions. They can help maintain an oppressive status quo by, for instance, making it appropriate to discount assertions made by members of oppressed groups (see Tirrell 2018).

³ I take it that the doubts raised by epistemic gaslighters are unwarranted on McKinnon's (2017) account by virtue of her remarks on pp. 169–70: in brief, that gaslighters' doubts are based on a false belief that they're epistemically better-positioned than the reporter to identify the harm(s) reported. Note that Pohlhaus, in her account of *structural* epistemic gaslighting, also supposes that the challenges are unwarranted: structural epistemic gaslighting "occurs when a person, practice, image, or institution exerts unwarranted pressure on epistemic agents to doubt their own perceptions" (Pohlhaus 2020, 679).

of something that occurs systematically. In what follows, I give reasons to think that, in addition, doubts about such harms/injustices are raised systematically. Granted that these doubts are raised systematically, it's plausible that normative gaslighting is apt to make someone doubt her perceptions in part because it occurs systematically.

I make the case that normative gaslighting occurs systematically in the next two sections. First, I appeal to examples and relevant statistics to make the case that normative gaslighting is at least quite common. Second, I appeal to scholarship on epistemologies of ignorance to make the case that normative gaslighting is common because it is systematically produced by dominant epistemic systems. In section 2, I propose that these points give us reason to suppose that dominant conversational norms often make normative gaslighting appropriate. In effect, I clarify what normative gaslighting is and make the case that it's systemic in order to motivate the claim that dominant conversational norms make gaslighting "appropriate" in the relevant cases. Thus, this paper is less concerned with what gaslighting *is* and more concerned with features of our social systems that make it more common and, in some cases, more vicious.⁴ The points raised here suggest ways to address the prevalence of gaslighting by attending to features of our social environment.

1.1. Examples

In the paradigm examples of normative gaslighting, a speaker reports an injustice that targets a subordinate group, and then multiple others raise unwarranted doubts about this report and/or reporter. We can see this type of sequence play out in various public reports of systemic injustice. As Kate Manne has pointed out, for instance, the following rhythm is pathetically common: some misogynistic injustice occurs, and people say publicly that it was an instance of misogyny, but then media commentators repeatedly and vehemently raise doubts about whether it was *really* an instance of misogyny and about the perceptual capacities of those who said it was misogynistic. Take the 2014 Isla Vista murders. In a video posted online before the killings, the murderer, Elliot Rodger, had accused girls and women collectively of giving "their affection and sex and love to other men but never to me;" as an apparent consequence of this, he said, "I will punish you all for it" (Manne 2018, 35). Many women and other feminists quickly pointed out that the murders were part of a broader pattern of attitudes, behaviors, and social forces that target women for punishment when they don't give men "affection and sex and love" (36). Then, predictably, multiple others responded to these reports of systemic injustice by publicly raising doubts. Steven Pinker tweeted, for instance, "The idea

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this way of framing the project in this paper.

that the [Isla Vista] murders are part of a pattern of hatred against women is statistically obtuse” (Pinker 2014; quoted in Manne 2018, 37). In an article in the *National Review*, Heather Mac Donald suggested that those who make connections between the murders and misogyny are “solipsists” who are “apparently living in a different world” (Mac Donald 2014; quoted in Manne 2018, 38).

A similar pattern plausibly unfolded in early 2019, when a video depicting racial abuse “went viral” on social and news media. In the video, Nathan Phillips, a Native American man, is surrounded by an all-White group of students who jeer at him and do the “tomahawk chop,” a gesture that endorses violent stereotypes of Indigenous Americans.⁵ Many who saw the video, including reporters for National Public Radio and the *Washington Post*, pointed out that the video depicts racial abuse. In response, several news outlets ran editorials denying that the manifestly racist behavior we’d all witnessed had in fact been racist. In an opinion for the *Washington Examiner*, Becket Adams (2019) wrote, “The teens abused no one. They mistreated no one.” In an opinion for Fox News, Todd Starnes wrote,

In context, it appears that what really happened on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is that a group of Catholic school boys was targeted and harassed by grown adults just because they were white, Catholic Trump supporters. (Starnes 2019)

Commenting on this pattern in the *Guardian*, Jason Wilson called it “gaslighting:”

Media outlets have been effectively gaslighted, and many climbed down from coverage which was based on the most clear and obvious interpretation of the boys chanting, making gestures and making tomahawk chops. (Wilson 2019)

Prima facie, Wilson is right. In pointing out that the video depicts racism, speakers connected Phillips’s experience to other injustices that target members of a socially subordinate group. In response, many raised doubts that events had unfolded as reported, even though the video was available for all to see.

We can make similar points about public and media responses to allegations of sexual harassment or abuse raised by Anita Hill, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, E. Jean Carroll, and many, many others. Each of these women credibly accused a high profile

⁵ Francesca Paris, “Video Of Kentucky Students Mocking Native American Man Draws Outcry,” NPR, January 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/20/686988268/video-of-kentucky-students-mocking-native-american-man-draws-outcry>.

and powerful man of sexual harassment or abuse; and for each, responses in media and public conversation raised doubts about her claims and her ability to perceive events accurately, not to mention her character, her motivations, and, often, the value of her life.

These patterns persist in less visible cases as well, of course. Karen C. Adkins describes cases in which complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace are dismissed or met with accusations that raise doubts about the complainant's perceptual capabilities: she's "too sensitive" or "crazy" (Adkins 2019, 76, 83). A 2020 dissertation on institutional responses to campus racism found that such responses routinely minimize and dismiss the concerns of students who protest racism (Cho 2020; see also Cho 2018). A 2019 study of sexual assault and harassment at music festivals in Australia found that those who reported assault or harassment to police, security, or festival officials "typically recalled negative responses from authority figures, such as victim-blaming, not taking the report seriously, and/or a failure to take appropriate action." (Fileborn, Wadds, and Tomsen 2019, 4, 29) A study of sexual violence at music events in England found similar results; participants reported that security "shrugged their shoulders and took no further action" in response to reports of sexual violence, while venue staff, bands, and promoters seemed to accept the rape myth that "women lie about being assaulted" (Hill, Hesmondhalgh, and Megson 2020, 378–79). A 2015 study of police responses to reports of domestic violence in New South Wales found that in about 10 percent of reports, police minimized, belittled, or ignored the report or reporter; the researchers concluded that "many police did not take domestic violence reports seriously" (Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2016, 1, 8). And, of course, when police and other law enforcement are credibly accused of racist violence, and even where there is video depicting that violence, those accusations and the people who make them are very often dismissed and discredited, not to mention retaliated against.

I take it that these examples and related statistics make at least a *prima facie* case that it's rather common for reports of systemic injustice to be met with multiple unwarranted doubts about both the report and the reporter. Readers may also be familiar with other cases of these sorts, local to their workplace, neighborhood, hobbies, or other communities in which they participate. Ultimately, my concern here is to motivate the point that not only is gaslighting like this common but it's systematically made appropriate by conversational norms that have been warped by systemic oppression. The next section makes the case that normative gaslighting occurs systematically. I support the claim about conversational norms in section 2.

1.2. Epistemologies of Ignorance

In this section, I appeal to scholarship on epistemologies of ignorance to motivate the claim that normative gaslighting occurs systematically. In brief, I make

the case this way: scholarship on epistemologies of ignorance shows that contemporary systems of oppression tend to be supported by epistemic systems that cultivate ignorance of oppression; they systematically produce ignorance of oppression and its injustices. It's plausible that systems like this succeed partly by responding to reports of systemic injustice by raising doubts about the report and/or reporter. Normative gaslighting would serve this purpose: it occurs whenever some person(s) report systemic injustice, and then multiple others raise unwarranted doubts about that report and/or reporter. I take this as reason to suppose that normative gaslighting is common because it is produced systematically by dominant epistemic systems. After making this case, I distinguish normative gaslighting from Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.'s account of structural epistemic gaslighting.

Charles Mills and others have developed the idea that where there is systemic oppression, the oppressive systems are often accompanied by social-epistemic systems that maintain ignorance of oppression. Epistemologies of ignorance study social-epistemic systems like these and articulate the mechanisms by which ignorance is produced.

For instance, Mills's (2007) well-known work on White ignorance articulates mechanisms by which ignorance of racial oppression is produced in societies influenced by White domination and European colonization. He says ignorance of racial oppression is produced when European colonizers are characterized in educational texts and courses as having *discovered* various territories, obscuring the truth that they *colonized* the lands and committed genocide against their peoples (Mills 2007, 27). In Belgium, ignorance regarding the deaths of millions of Congolese during King Leopold II's regime in Belgian Congo was maintained by the systematic destruction of Belgian state archives (29). Ignorance of a 1921 racist massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was maintained when the city's official records on the event disappeared (32). And so on. Mills even points out that mainstream Western political philosophy contributes to systematic ignorance of racial oppression by making "no mention of the centrality of racial injustice to the 'basic structure' of the United States" (33). But we shouldn't take it that only *racial* oppression is obscured by our social-epistemic systems; rather, our epistemic systems plausibly help obscure many systemic oppressions and their injustices: misogyny, sexual abuse, colonial genocide and exploitation, transphobia, ableism, and more.

It's plausible that systems like this work partly by making it so that reports of systemic injustice and those who report them are systematically doubted. There are of course many ways that this might be achieved, but one direct way would be to encourage audiences to such reports to raise doubts—whether warranted or not—about the report and/or reporter. That is, one way to maintain systematic ignorance of systemic oppression and injustice is to ensure that normative gaslighting occurs systematically. I take it that this is *prima facie* reason to suppose that normative

gaslighting is common because it is produced systematically by dominant epistemic systems.

We can bolster this *prima facie* supposition by raising additional support for the general idea that social-epistemic systems of ignorance work partly by determining norms that govern conversation (Alcoff 2007, 50; Engelhardt 2019). As I have described elsewhere (e.g., Engelhardt 2019, 632–33), White ignorance is sustained partly by widespread conversational rules that make it inappropriate to use the term “racist” in ways that acknowledge racist structures, systems, or histories; it’s appropriate only to use it for individuals that are openly hostile to people of color.

This point bolsters the supposition on grounds that normative gaslighting occurs in conversations, broadly construed. Indeed, as I claim in the next section, conversational norms often make it permissible to raise rationally unwarranted doubts about reports of systemic injustice—that is, conversational norms make normative gaslighting permissible or appropriate. If we have general reason to accept that systems of ignorance influence our conversational norms in ways that systematically pressure us to ignore instances of systemic injustice, then it’s at least a plausible hypothesis that systems of ignorance systematically license normative gaslighting in order to exert this pressure. If this hypothesis is correct, then normative gaslighting is common, as we saw in the last section, because it is produced systematically by dominant epistemic systems of ignorance.

Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. has also developed an account of gaslighting that draws on epistemologies of ignorance; it will be helpful to distinguish her account from mine before moving on. In part, Pohlhaus’s idea is that epistemic systems of ignorance gaslight those who are aware of experiencing systemic oppression. As Pohlhaus describes it, one is gaslighted by virtue of carrying on epistemically within a system of ignorance while also experiencing the oppression that others are pressured to ignore:

The epistemic pressures placed upon nondominantly situated persons within epistemologies of ignorance to ignore instances of injustice that they face constitute a form of epistemic gaslighting. Mills and most of the epistemology of ignorance literature highlights the effects of structural injustice on producing ignorance and vicious knowers. In contrast, the term *epistemic gaslighting* highlights those whose experienced world is ignored and how very epistemically difficult it can be to traverse a world within which your experiencing of that world is systematically ignored by the knowers around you. (Pohlhaus 2020, 679–80)

On Pohlhaus’s account, then, there is incomplete but substantive overlap between epistemic structural gaslighting and normative gaslighting, and neither wholly

subsumes the other. Whenever a nondominantly situated knower reports a systemic injustice and multiple others raise unwarranted doubts about report and/or reporter, it will be an instance of both normative gaslighting and structural epistemic gaslighting. But there will of course be cases in which a nondominantly situated knower hasn't reported a systemic injustice but she is still pressured to ignore instances of injustice she's faced—her reporting may be preempted, for instance, by cultural messaging that makes it clear that she'll experience victim-blaming, retaliation, and perhaps violence, loss of income, loss of social support, and so forth. When this happens, it's a case of structural epistemic gaslighting but not normative gaslighting. On the other hand, if a speaker who is *not* nondominantly situated reports systemic injustice, and then multiple others raise unwarranted doubts about the report and/or reporter, then this will be a case of normative gaslighting but not structural epistemic gaslighting. Although the subjects of normative gaslighting often are nondominantly situated, they needn't be. In many cases, commentators who publicly assert that something racist or misogynist was in fact racist or misogynist are not dominantly situated, but they are often still subjects of normative gaslighting.

So far, I've made the case that normative gaslighting occurs systematically. In the next section, I take up and develop a point gestured at above—namely, that dominant conversational norms make normative gaslighting appropriate.

2. Oppressive Language Games

Many philosophers have pointed out that gaslighting of various kinds often seems enabled by broader social facts: cultural scripts, institutional policies, professional norms, and more. For instance, Cynthia Stark proposes that when women are gaslighted after reporting gendered dominance, this gaslighting is often underwritten by broader misogynist structures that encourage hostility that targets women.

Misogynist hostility is delivered by people when they do such things as adhere to culturally condoned scripts, conform their actions to the reigning ideology, participate in rituals, traditions, long-standing practices, etc. Hence, people may enact it unwittingly—they may not harbor overtly misogynist attitudes and may not be aiming to enforce patriarchal norms. (Stark 2019, 230)

Karen C. Adkins makes a similar point. Speaking of Kathy Ahern's (2018, 62) account of how nurses are gaslighted when they report injustice at work, Adkins (2019, 84) says that seemingly isolated incidents in fact "often [reflect] unstated but consistent policies and values held by the institution." Elena Ruiz makes the case that the norms and practices of professional philosophy perpetrate "a kind of

professionalized, *ambient* abuse,” wherein work that doesn’t hew to a narrow, predominantly White conception of philosophy is subject to relentless challenges asking “how is this project philosophy, again?” She calls this abuse “professional gaslighting” (Ruíz 2014, 201; emphasis added).

This section pursues a similar line of thought by appeal to Lynne Tirrell’s work on language games shaped by oppression. After introducing Tirrell’s framework, I suggest two modest extensions motivated by the above reflections on normative gaslighting. In brief, I say that in some dominant language games, the rules make it appropriate to challenge those who report systemic injustice, even if the challenge would otherwise be rationally unwarranted.⁶ At the end of the section, I sketch a traditional line to explain how speakers can gaslight in accordance with the rules of language games without intending to gaslight or even intending to follow conversational rules—perhaps similar to how Stark says above that we can enact misogynist hostility unwittingly.

Tirrell works within a framework according to which conversation is fruitfully understood as a *rule-governed* activity—a language game—such that speakers’ contributions to conversation are marked by changes in their *normative statuses*. The observation that some contributions are “out of bounds” gives us reason to suppose that conversation is rule-governed (see McGowan 2009, 395). For instance, if you and I are talking about your new home, saying things like “The house is beautiful, but the property needs work” and “We rent the house,” it’s out of bounds for either of us to use the phrase “the house” to refer to some other house. It’d be out of bounds for me to say of my own home, “The house will have to be sold when I move” (see McGowan 2009, 394). Since some contributions to conversation are out of bounds, conversation is a rule-governed activity. The rules make it so that some “moves” we make in conversation are out of bounds and some are fair play.⁷

Conversational contributions change our normative statuses in that they tend to give and/or take away entitlements and commitments. If Ghassan promises to help me with my taxes, he takes on a commitment to do just that. In addition, I become

⁶ Similar points supporting the idea that conversational norms often make it permissible to raise rationally unwarranted doubts about reports of systemic injustice can also be found in Ichikawa (2020) and Tuckwell (2022).

⁷ This isn’t to say, of course, that if you break a conversational rule, there’ll be a trial and you may go to conversation jail. David Lewis (1979, 347) points out that when no one objects to impermissible moves, conversational rules tend to evolve to make participants’ moves count as fair play. Typically, we register that something has gone amiss, and the conversation may temporarily “breakdown” while we adjust to the turn the conversation has taken.

entitled to carry on as though Ghassan *will* help me; everyone else in the conversation becomes entitled to assert that Ghassan promised to help me; and so on. Ghassan's promise is a conversational contribution, and when he makes it, he changes his normative status by taking on a commitment; my normative status changes because I accrue a new entitlement; and so on.

Within this framework, Tirrell pays especial attention to *assertions* and *challenges* to assertions. When Ghassan asserts that I've made a mistake on my tax form, he takes on new commitments: he commits himself to the truth of what he's asserted, to defending his assertion if it's challenged, to answering questions about his claim, and so on. One way that someone might challenge Ghassan's assertion is by challenging whether he was entitled to make it. Chitra may challenge his credentials as an accountant, for instance, or his general ability to identify errors on tax returns. In maintaining his commitment to the truth of his assertion, Ghassan should meet those challenges that come his way. Chitra's challenge changes Ghassan's normative status by putting his claim into doubt, making it so that he must meet her challenge, give up the claim, or perhaps challenge Chitra's entitlement to make her challenge.

Challenges are also conversational contributions, of course, and a speaker who makes a challenge takes on commitments of their own. For instance, if Ghassan replies to meet Chitra's challenge, she commits herself to answering his reply or else withdrawing her challenge. And just as Chitra might challenge Ghassan's entitlement to his assertion, someone might challenge a challenger's entitlement to make their challenge.

A speaker's epistemic authority relative to other participants can influence how assertions and challenges affect her normative status. If Ghassan is a certified accountant with years of experience and a sterling reputation while Chitra is filing taxes for the first time, it would seem that her challenge is unwarranted or unentitled *unless* she can produce some compensating justification, showing that in fact the challenge is warranted. Thanks to their relative epistemic positions, when Chitra makes her challenge, she incurs a burden to show that her challenge is warranted, and unless she shoulders this burden, her challenge will be unwarranted, unentitled. It's as if Chitra's challenge is unwarranted by default—when she makes it, it's as if she must meet a challenge to her entitlement for it even without anyone making that challenge.

If the tables are turned, however, and Chitra has years of experience while Ghassan is a novice, then Chitra's challenge will have a different effect on normative statuses. Her relative authority in the conversation will more likely make it so that her challenge is entitled by default. When she makes her challenge, she doesn't incur a burden to show that it is warranted, and instead, Ghassan incurs the burden of meeting her challenge as soon as she makes it. Indeed, in this context, because

Ghassan is a novice, *his assertion* might be challenged by default. That is, it might be that Ghassan’s relative authority in the conversation makes it so that when he asserts that I’ve made a mistake, he straightaway incurs a burden to show that this assertion is warranted. And unless he shoulders this burden, his assertion will be unwarranted. It’s as if his assertion has faced a challenge even if no one has in fact moved to challenge what he’s said.

Tirrell points out that, for language communities beset by systemic oppression, this normative structure of entitlements and commitments is—like almost everything—warped by that oppression. If participants in some conversation were all to have roughly equal social standing, then epistemic authority would plausibly affect entitlements and commitments in that conversation in the ways described above. But when participants in a conversation occupy different positions in a social hierarchy—structured by race, gender, class, and so on—then these differential positions will also play a role in shaping how conversational moves affect participants’ normative statuses. For instance, Tirrell says that a speaker’s being a woman is “often *prima facie* justified grounds for challenge” to her conversational contributions (Tirrell 2018, 24). When a woman makes an assertion, anyone who would challenge that assertion won’t typically incur the burden of justifying that challenge. Rather, the challenge is justified by the asserter’s subordinate social position. Generally, Tirrell (2018, 24) says that “oppressed people often face default challenges.”⁸ The specifics of how hierarchical social positioning affects assertions and challenges will of course depend on the practices and discourses in which those assertions and challenges take place, on the participants’ intersectional social positions, and so on; but I take it that, generally, when one speaks from a subordinate social position, challenges to one’s assertions typically need no further justification—such challenges are justified by default or by the asserter’s subordinate social position.

Coming back to normative gaslighting, it’s easy to see how Tirrell’s work can help explain some of what we’ve observed. In normative gaslighting, multiple speakers raise unwarranted doubts about reports of systemic injustice and those who report them, especially when the reporter occupies a subordinate social position. If normative gaslighting occurs systematically, then speakers systematically raise

⁸ The point that a speaker’s marginalized social identity negatively affects their conversational contributions has also been made by others from within a variety of theoretical frameworks and perspectives. See, for example, Dotson (2012), McKinney (2016), Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018), Ichikawa (2020), Podosky (2022), and Tuckwell (2022). Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to note the similarities among these works.

unwarranted doubts in response to reports of systemic injustice. Tirrell's framework can help us explain why unwarranted—or better, *rationally* unwarranted—doubts would be raised so often (indeed, systematically) in response to certain speakers' assertions. It's because when our language games are distorted by oppression, challenges against assertions made by subordinate speakers are warranted *by default* or by the asserter's subordinate social position. When the rules of the language game are like this, it doesn't matter if the challenger is in a worse epistemic position than the asserter,⁹ it doesn't matter if the challenger's stated reasons are unfounded, and it doesn't matter if the challenger gives no reasons at all. When the language game is fixed against subordinate speakers in this way, challenges to subordinate speakers' assertions are "warranted" by the game's rigged rules.

This suggests that it may be fruitful to suppose that normative gaslighters are following conversational rules, but if normative gaslighting occurs systematically, there's more to our oppressive language games than the aforementioned default challenges. First, the appeal to default challenges would tell us why *all* assertions made by subordinate speakers face unwarranted doubts, but it wouldn't explain why reports of systemic injustice seem especially likely to invite gaslighting. Furthermore, as noted above, although normative gaslighting most often occurs when subordinate speakers report systemic injustice, it doesn't occur *only* then. It can occur when *anyone* reports a systemic injustice.

Together, these two points suggest that it's not only speakers' subordinate positioning but also *reports of systemic injustice* that are underwriting unwarranted challenges. There are two ways we might deploy Tirrell's framework to accommodate this point. First, we might say that reports of systemic injustice also face default challenges. Second, for some language games, we might say something stronger: that reporting systemic injustice is out of bounds. Both changes to the framework would make it so that every speaker in the conversation is warranted in raising rationally unwarranted doubts about a report of systemic injustice. This would explain why speakers so often raise rationally unwarranted doubts in the relevant contexts. In addition, since *every* speaker would be warranted in raising unwarranted doubts, this would explain why multiple speakers so often do so—each has warrant for it. Each proposal would also help us understand why other speakers rarely intervene to stop normative gaslighting: the gaslighters' doubts are warranted in the conversation. As Karen Adkins argues, when others are thus complicit in (or at least silent about) gaslighting, it can give the gaslighter and his doubts greater authority, making it seem to the subject as though "'the world' is not as she thinks it is, but that everyone else

⁹ As in McKinnon's (2017, 169–70) example. See also many cases of mansplaining, Whitesplaining, etc.

has access to reality she lacks” (Adkins 2019, 77, 82). With normative gaslighting, that would be to give the impression that no systemic injustice occurred. If normative gaslighting gives this impression to anyone—agents, patients, or onlookers—it would be quite effective at maintaining ignorance of systemic injustice.

In contexts where either of these proposals holds *and* Tirrell’s default challenges are in play, then when the speaker who reports a systemic injustice occupies a subordinate social position, warrant to challenge her report will be overdetermined. This can help us explain why the subjects of normative gaslighting so often occupy subordinate social positions. I develop this point further below, after articulating the two ways we might extend Tirrell’s framework.

First, there are plausibly contexts in which reports of systemic injustice face default challenges. This is just to say that in such contexts, when one reports that a systemic injustice has occurred, the rules make it so that others can appropriately challenge such assertions without needing further justification or epistemic authority. This makes it so that everyone in the conversation is entitled to challenge the assertion, and so it makes it more likely that multiple people will raise doubts about the report and reporter, no matter their justification or epistemic standing. Thus, when reporters for National Public Radio and the *Washington Post* asserted that Nathan Phillips had been racially abused in a widely viewed video, they asserted that a systemic injustice had occurred. *Prima facie*, making an appropriate challenge to this assertion would require some justification or epistemic authority. After all, the assertion was “based on the most clear and obvious interpretation” of what can be seen in the video—namely, “the boys chanting, making gestures and making tomahawk chops”—and the video was readily available on the internet (Wilson 2019). But in some public conversational contexts, it was treated as appropriate for an op-ed to say simply, “The teens abused no one. They mistreated no one” (Adams 2019). And it was treated as appropriate for another to say, “What really happened . . . is that a group of Catholic school boys was targeted and harassed by grown adults just because they were white, Catholic Trump supporters” (Starnes 2019). In both cases, the authors challenged the assertion that the video depicted racial abuse. In each case, the author offered either little or no justification for the challenge; neither author had witnessed the relevant events first-hand, and neither had any expertise relevant to racial abuse, racism, and so on. If reports of systemic injustice face default challenges, then we can say that these challenges were nonetheless treated as appropriate (by many, but of course not all of us) because challenges to reports of systemic injustice are always appropriate in many dominant language games; they need no further justification or especial epistemic authority. Our language games make it appropriate to epistemically gaslight those who report systemic injustice exactly because they are reporting systemic injustice. Similarly, when the undergraduate in Abramson’s example says that the community has a problem with

racism, audience members don't need to justify their doubts or to have any epistemic authority on the community or racism; their challenges to the student's assertion are warranted by default because of the kind of assertion it is.

Second, we might suppose that in some language games, it's just out of bounds to report systemic injustice. If a speaker were to report some systemic injustice in a language game like this, the rules would make it appropriate for others to object or raise doubts because the report violates the rules and objections to rule-violations are warranted. When a participant in a language games makes a move that's impermissible, those who raise doubts or objections need not have epistemic authority or justification for their challenge; their challenges are warranted by the rules of the game. If everyone is entitled to enforce the rules of the game, then everyone is entitled to challenge moves that are out of bounds, so it's again more likely that multiple conversational participants will raise doubts about report and reporter.

This proposal looks more plausible the more seriously we take the idea that our epistemic systems affect conversational norms so as to produce ignorance of systemic injustice. One way to produce ignorance of systemic injustice is to make talking about it forbidden. According to Mills, the system of White ignorance does something close. For Whites, the system makes it forbidden to challenge the system of ignorance on pain of forfeiting the benefits of Whiteness (Mills 1997, 18). For people of color, conformity to the system of ignorance is enforced by "the two traditional weapons of coercion: physical violence and ideological conditioning" (83). Prima facie, reports of systemic injustice challenge epistemic systems that produce ignorance of these injustices.¹⁰ If so, and if Mills is right, then reports of systemic injustice will tend to provoke the reactions that enforce conformity to the system of ignorance. To generalize, subordinate speakers who report systemic injustice will be subject to violence and ideological conditioning; dominant speakers who do the same will be in danger of forfeiting their dominant status (presumably just for the period of the conversation or just in the eyes of some conversational participants—not across all contexts and in all areas of life).

Where ignorance is enforced these ways, the doubts raised in the process of normative gaslighting will play a different role in enforcement depending on whether the speaker they're raised against occupies a dominant or subordinate social position. When the speaker is subordinate, the conversational norms may make normative gaslighting appropriate as a form of ideological conditioning: the doubts raised should

¹⁰ It's important to note that reports of injustices that target subordinate groups can also be deployed to reinforce oppressive systems. For instance, reports of sexual abuse targeting women have historically been used to "justify" racist violence.

get the speaker to doubt her own interpretation of events, to accept her gaslighters' interpretation, and ultimately, to adopt the gaslighters' *worldview*. In short, conversational norms in this case may warrant something resembling gaslighting as Abramson understands it: the point is to “radically undermine someone’s sense of standing to protest bad conduct” (Abramson 2014, 6).

When the speaker is dominantly situated, then the norms won’t typically warrant ideological conditioning. Instead, they’ll make it appropriate to raise doubts about the report and perhaps about the reporter’s entitlement to a privileged social position. In this case, doubts raised as part of normative gaslighting may serve more as warnings or corrective nudges: “Do you really believe that?” “You’re starting to sound like one of *them*.” “Do you really think he would do something like that?” The point will be to get the speaker to retract his report and to come back into conformity with the rules that make such assertions impermissible.

Furthermore, the proposal may seem more plausible in light of some recent cultural trends: political efforts to ban “critical race theory” from US public education, to defund gender studies programs, and to prohibit accurate education on colonialism, sexual orientation, imperialism. In 2021, at least thirty-six US states adopted or introduced laws or policies to restrict the teaching of “critical race theory,” institutional racism, White privilege, or other topics related to systemic racial oppression. Gender studies has come under imminent legal threat from political leaders in Hungary (Redden 2018), Wyoming (Greenberg 2022), Brazil, and Florida (Cabrera 2020), but of course rhetoric attacking gender studies as a field is much more widespread (Redden 2018). For those who support these efforts, it’s not only warranted to raise doubts about reports of systemic injustice; it’s impermissible to report systemic injustice in the first place. It is—or according to some, it should be—out of bounds to teach school-age children about histories of racial oppression, women’s oppression, and colonial genocide. Those who support defunding gender studies programs are plausibly invested in maintaining ignorance about gender norms, their histories, and their oppressive effects. *Prima facie*, they support conversational rules according to which it’s out of bounds to make accurate assertions regarding gender norms and their oppressive effects.

Note that if each of the aforementioned rules holds in some contexts, then we have several ways to understand why normative gaslighting more often targets subordinate speakers and why it is likely more severe when it does. I don’t claim that these are the only reasons why normative gaslighting most often targets subordinate speakers; surely stereotypes, cultural scripts, biases, and structural power relations also play a role in the explanation. But these points can help us understand why the subjects of normative gaslighting most often occupy subordinate social positions. First, where either of the two rules proposed above holds, then if Tirrell is right about default challenges, there will be at least two rules making it appropriate to raise

rationality unwarranted doubts about a subordinate speaker's report of systemic injustice. Warrants to raise doubts will be overdetermined, presumably making it more probable that speakers will raise doubts. Second, there are many reasons to suppose that subordinate speakers are more likely to report systemic injustice. For instance, subordinate speakers are plausibly more likely both to experience systemic injustice and to know that they're experiencing it (see Mills 1998, 21–40). If subordinate speakers report systemic injustice more often, then there are more occasions to normatively gaslight them. Third, where the aforementioned rule making it impermissible to report systemic injustices holds, then responses to subordinate speakers will be more severe while responses to dominant speakers might not even register as gaslighting, even though they do involve raising rationally unwarranted doubts.

Before concluding this section, I should say something about how people may come to follow the rules of language games. On the one hand, I've argued that normative gaslighting occurs systematically, and I've taken that as reason to suppose that there are conversational rules that make normative gaslighting appropriate. On the other, I've said it's possible for speakers to perpetrate normative gaslighting without intending to gaslight. Moreover, it's implausible on its face that, in every instance of normative gaslighting, the gaslighters intend to enforce oppressive norms or to follow conversational rules. How can that be? How can conversational rules play a role in explaining speakers' gaslighting behaviors if speakers aren't plausibly intending to follow the rules (or to gaslight)? My answer follows a response developed by Wilfrid Sellars.

In his influential work on language games, Sellars (1954, 209) makes the case that to say a language game is governed by rules isn't to say that speakers always *intend* to follow the rules, that all speakers are aware of the rules, or that one must be taught the rules explicitly in order to be a competent speaker. While one *may* learn a rule of a language game explicitly as a rule, and one may thus be aware of (some of) the language's rules, and one may intend to follow the rules,¹¹ this isn't necessary for one's "moves" in a language game to be governed by the rules of the game. Consider the rule noted above: if participants in a discussion are repeatedly using "the house" to refer to Anne's house, then it's typically out of bounds for someone to abruptly use the phrase "the house" to refer to some other house (see McGowan 2009, 394). This is a rule governing conversations in English that you probably followed for years before becoming aware of it as a rule, without intending to follow the rule, and without having been taught the rule explicitly. Rather, as you've participated in language games, you've developed dispositions that produce behaviors that conform

¹¹ For instance, if one is learning Italian from a grammar book written in English.

to the rules of the game, and this was sufficient to make it so that, for the most part, you followed the rules. As John Haugeland (1998, 149) says, all it takes to reliably abide by even elaborate norms is this: people need “simply acquire the relevant complexes of dispositions from their fellows (via imitation and positive and negative censoriousness), and then behave as they are disposed.” Similarly, normative gaslighters needn’t intend to gaslight, to maintain ignorance of systemic injustice, or to follow the rules of any language games. And normative gaslighters needn’t have been taught the relevant conversational rules explicitly and then eventually “internalized” those rules. Rather, they need only to have developed dispositions that produce behaviors that conform to the rules—just as nearly all competent speakers of English have developed dispositions to conform to the rule about definite descriptions like “the house” without having been taught the rule explicitly, without consciously intending to follow the rule, and often without awareness of any such rule.

Thus, one way that many people plausibly develop dispositions to follow conversational norms like those I’ve proposed is by “imitation and positive and negative censoriousness.” If normative gaslighting is as common as I’ve claimed and often public, speakers should have ample opportunity to imitate others who participate in normative gaslighting, and they needn’t be explicitly told any conversational norms that make it appropriate—they’ll ‘see’ that it’s appropriate as it unfolds and others treat it as appropriate. Take Abramson’s example with the graduate student:

I moved out of one field of philosophy in grad school due to an overwhelming accumulation of small incidents. . . . When I tried to describe to fellow grad students why I felt ostracized or ignored because of my gender, they would ask for examples. I would provide examples, and they would proceed through each example to “demonstrate” why I had actually misinterpreted or overreacted to what was actually going on. (Abramson 2014, 5)

It’s not difficult to imagine that some of the students present for this normative gaslighting were still in the process of learning to navigate the norms in the profession, in the department, in graduate school, and so forth, and they weren’t in a good position to reflect on or perhaps even entertain the question of whether those norms ought to be followed. They were just trying to fit in, to shake off impostor syndrome, to be taken seriously, and so on. For someone in that position, imitating other students’ responses may well lead to a disposition to treat reports of gendered injustice in the field as if they are unwarranted and ought to be challenged in the ways described. Similar normative gaslightings unfold in news media, social media, and

institutional responses to injustice; they occur when teachers, religious leaders, and other authority figures are presented with reports of systemic injustice and similar wrongs. When normative gaslighting is so common and visible, speakers imitating these responses to reports of systemic injustice will plausibly develop dispositions to follow conversational rules that make it warranted.

That said, it's also plausible that many people develop the relevant dispositions because they're following apparently innocuous conversational norms that in fact covertly support systematic ignorance of systemic oppression.¹² For instance, there are various mechanisms that encourage speakers to treat as warranted various false assertions that, if true, would make reports of systemic injustice unwarranted. In the paradigm cases, these false assertions suggest in various ways that Western societies are inclusive and egalitarian on the whole, implying that race- and gender-based injustices are not systemic but deviations from the norm (see Mills 2007, 17). Such assertions are easily found, for instance, in school curricula—on US history, on the Enlightenment, on European colonialism, on political philosophy, and so on—and at all levels of education (26–33). Insofar as a disposition to treat such assertions as warranted will also treat assertions about systemic injustice as unwarranted, Western educational systems encourage the development of dispositions that will follow the aforementioned conversational norms without explicitly teaching or mentioning those norms. Many more such mechanisms are discussed in scholarship on epistemologies of ignorance.

At this point, an objection might come to mind. When we follow rules without explicit recognition of them or their purpose, we tend to find behavior that comports with the rule unremarkable and hardly noticeable. So too with normative gaslighting: many who participate in it likely don't think of it as differing from other epistemic practices in which dubious claims are challenged. But there is a notable difference between the rule about definite descriptions and the rules making gaslighting appropriate. If one were pressed to say why we follow the rule about definite descriptions, the ordinary speaker would likely say something like, "That's just how it is." It's not likely to go that way if you point out to someone that they're following the rules proposed above. Is that reason to think that we're *not* following the rules proposed above?

I don't think so. There are strong cultural taboos against acknowledging and endorsing overtly discriminatory behaviors. Of course, this fact doesn't give us reason to suppose that people don't participate in practices that perpetuate discrimination and oppression. Rather, participation in such practices is common; our culture

¹² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to develop this way of accounting for how the relevant dispositions might be acquired.

maintains these practices *and* the taboo against acknowledging overt discrimination in part by supplying ready-made denials and deflections. Similarly, if one were asked why he raised doubts about some report of sexual abuse, racial abuse, or some other systemic injustice, there are cultural scripts that provide answers: “She’s just looking for attention.” “Nobody except him can know whether he did it because he hates women/people of color.” “C’mon—did you see how she was dressed?” “But he has Black friends!”

Indeed, notice that if one were to point out that, say, others are following a rule that makes it appropriate to doubt women’s assertions without rational warrant, this would be to assert that systemic injustice has occurred. That is, in this case, if one were to acknowledge the rules that make normative gaslighting appropriate in the contexts where those rules are in force, then it would be appropriate for others to engage in normative gaslighting. They would be licensed to deflect the assertion by raising rationally unwarranted doubts about it, raising doubts about the asserter’s perceptual and interpretive capacities, and so on. Normative gaslighting helps obscure the rules that make normative gaslighting appropriate.

Conclusion

I’ve made the case that the rules of oppressive language games often make normative gaslighting an “appropriate” response to reports of systemic injustice. Above, I suggested that if reports of systemic injustice are systematically met with doubts, then such doubt-raising behaviors are apt to make people doubt their perceptions of injustice *by virtue of their occurring systematically* (Podosky 2021, 211). If dominant conversational norms make normative gaslighting an appropriate response to reports of systemic injustice, then it plausibly occurs systematically when systemic injustice is reported. This is what gives normative gaslighting the characteristic feature of gaslighting: for those who suffer it, it is apt to induce “negative attitudes toward [their] own interpretive abilities” (211). When it is successful at inducing such negative attitudes or at reinforcing gaslighters’ own ignorance of systemic injustice, normative gaslighting serves the epistemic systems that produce and enforce ignorance of systemic injustice. If normative gaslighting serves systems of ignorance, and if systems of ignorance systematically license normative gaslighting, then, plausibly, the two are mutually reinforcing or mutually dependent.

I don’t endorse the conversational norms described in this paper, of course. The point is to advance our understanding of the oppressive conditions that structure our lives and that make gaslighting commonplace. If it’s true that normative gaslighting occurs systematically in part thanks to our warped conversational norms, then we may be able to mitigate the prevalence of gaslighting by attending to these norms. Such efforts can be developed alongside ongoing efforts to address the

institutional, legal, social, and psychological causes of discrimination and oppression. Whereas many of these efforts are aware of and aim to address the ways in which subordinate speakers are discredited and dismissed, their programs can easily be adapted to also address the ways in which speakers who report systemic injustice are discredited and dismissed—especially, of course, when those speakers occupy subordinate social positions.

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