Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for taking the time to join Michigan Minds today. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. So I'd love to go ahead and get started. Could you please introduce yourself and tell us about your role at the University of Michigan?

Paige Sweet:

Sure. My name's Paige Sweet. I'm an assistant professor of sociology here at the University of Michigan. So I do research on gender-based violence, gender and sexuality. I teach graduate and undergraduate courses on social theory, gender-based violence, sociology of the body, and gender and sexuality.

Speaker 2:

In what areas does some of your research specifically focus?

Paige Sweet:

I focus mostly on domestic violence. So I have a book that looks at domestic violence survivors' experiences of navigating systems, so how systems that are set up to help victims achieve autonomy and independence often end up reinforcing some of the problems that put them in violent situations to begin with.

I also study gaslighting, which is what I think we're going to talk about today. So I have a couple projects that focus on gaslighting, where I interview people who've experienced gaslighting about their experiences of psychological abuse, both in intimate relationships and in places like the workplace.

Speaker 2:

Gaslighting has become a popular term. Recently, you spoke with Discover Magazine about what gaslighting can look like in relationships. As an expert and researcher on this topic, can you describe what gaslighting is and provide a few examples?

Paige Sweet:

Sure. Great. So gaslighting, it has become a really popular term. Sometimes when that happens, we lose the specificity of what the term refers to. That can be a good thing because it means that more people have this vocabulary to talk about whatever they're experiencing. But on the other hand, sometimes it means we don't really know what the term means when we use it.

So I think of gaslighting as when someone makes you seem or feel "crazy". So I often talk about it as a form of psychological abuse. Usually, if we're talking casually with people, domestic violence victims, for example, they might refer to an experience they have with an abuser as "crazy-making". So I often just describe it to people as the sort of crazy-making form of abuse, that experience of someone messing with your reality. It could be intentional, it could be unintentional.

The term gaslighting comes from the film Gaslight, which starred Ingrid Bergman and came out in the '40s. The term gaslight comes from the tactic that her abusive husband used against her in the film where he would brighten and dim the gaslights. Then when she mentioned that she noticed this, he would tell her that she was imagining it and that she was crazy and that she belonged in an asylum. And so, it's that experience of someone messing with your reality when you know something is happening that's wrong or bad, but someone convincing you that that's not the case.

So a couple examples might be in this more micro or intimate context, if you tell your partner, "It makes me feel really bad when you do X," like undermine me in front of the kids, for example, and your partner responds, "I don't do that. I would never do that. You're crazy. You're bipolar. You're seeking attention again. You're making this up. That kind of thing would be gaslighting, messing with your sense of reality and flipping the script.

Gaslighting can also happen in a slightly more macro context. So let's say you experienced racial harassment or discrimination at work and you go tell your employer about this, but your employer tells you, "No, we're really known for our diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. It seems like you're being too sensitive. You didn't really experience racism here." That would be another good example of gaslighting, and I think it's quite common, because basically it's saying that what you've experienced, the causes of that are not what you think they are. The causes of that are all in your head.

That's how I tend to think of gaslighting is when you experience something and someone tells you, "No, you're actually ... That's a little bit in your head. That didn't really happen."

We know that gaslighting is really common in domestic violence relationships and abusive relationships. That experience is denying abuse, minimizing the effects of abuse, distorting reality, so that the abuser doesn't have to take responsibility for abuse. In my research, I come across a lot of victims who've experienced their abusers making them look unstable in front of police or in court. And so, using those kinds of authoritative institutions to slash at someone's credibility to say, "No, you're not a real victim. You're making this up. You're exaggerating it in your head."

Often that can come through ... So, for example, many of the Black women that I've interviewed have experienced their abuser making them out to be the abuser in front of police and drawing on stereotypes about Black women as particularly aggressive or loud, for example, in order to discredit them in front of police.

And so, as you can imagine, when gaslighting happens in those kinds of spaces, it can have real devastating effects on people's access to resources and their ability to pursue rights and resources that should be available to them as a victim.

And so, I often talk about gaslighting as operating along lines of power differentials. So it really matters who has more power and control in an intimate relationship, and gaslighting happens along those lines of existing power and control relationships.

Speaker 2:

Thank you for sharing those examples to really help all of us understand exactly some of the different ways that this can appear. I imagine that this impacts mental health quite a bit. Could you discuss that relationship between gaslighting and mental health a little bit?

Paige Sweet:

Sure. Yeah, I think that's a great connection to make. So the people who I interview about their experiences of gaslighting often experience a lot of isolation around this experience, and that can have really detrimental effects on their sense of self, on their sense of wellbeing, on their ability to connect with others. So I think that, as one of my interviewees put it, gaslighting breathes on isolation.

So if this is happening to you repeatedly in your relationship, where your partner is making you feel like you're making things up, or that things that are happening to you are not really happening to you, or that things are happening to you because you're "crazy" and you're isolated, it means that you don't have anyone else to share this with and say, like, "Wait, is my partner right about this?" You need those other people in your life who can validate your reality and say, like, "No, that doesn't sound quite right. It sounds like your partner is maybe manipulating things a little bit."

But if you're really isolated, as many victims, let's say, of domestic violence are, if you're extremely isolated, it can be impossible to get those counternarratives from friends and family, other trusted people, to validate your own experience of reality. That can be really devastating and it just compounds isolation. We know that isolation, especially for older folks, for example, is a central cause of depression and other mental health effects. So I think that's a really key variable here is that gaslighting thrives on isolation.

The other thing is shame. So I think shame is a huge component of how gaslighting works. People who might gaslight another person might manipulate that sense of shame to keep someone isolated, keep them silent about what's going on. So like, "Oh, you're just seeking attention by claiming this."

So many of the people I interview experience gaslighting from their parents around experiences, let's say, of childhood sexual abuse. This is a really common theme that comes up. So if you've experienced sexual abuse as a child, you tell people about it or you talk to your parents about it and they say, like, "No, that didn't happen. You're making that up for attention. You must have really wanted something like this."

So the experience of sexual abuse is already wrapped up in all kinds of shame. Then when people manipulate that to keep you quiet about it, or to deny that that happened because they can't face it for themselves, whatever the reasons are that that might happen, I think shame really surrounds this, and that compounds isolation, compounds depression, and these other feelings that might come up around gaslighting.

I think people who experience gaslighting over long periods of time in long-term abusive relationships, that can lead to ... It's a really traumatizing experience that can lead to all sorts of mental health effects. I think, in general, just in a larger sense, all forms of psychological abuse are really invisible. We tend to really only prioritize or think about something as abusive when it's physically abusive, when someone has the black eye or the bruise or those really classic physical indicators of abuse.

But victims of domestic violence have been telling us for decades that psychological abuse is the most damaging, that it stays with them the longest, and has the most devastating effects. And so, I think we really need to take that seriously and think about how letting it remain invisible as a society just compounds those effects.

Speaker 2:

Are there any steps that people who are experiencing gaslighting can take to remove themselves from the situation?

Paige Sweet:

That's a good question. I mean I think one of the things that makes me happy about gaslighting becoming a more popular term is that I think it gives us a resource to understand what might be happening to us when we get that feeling in our stomach that like, "Oh God, something's wrong here. Someone's telling me that something didn't happen to me and I know it did," or whatever the context is.

So I think that's a good thing. I think having these terms out more in the public sphere, paying more attention to psychological abuse, I think all of those things give us resources to push back against any attempts to deny or distort our realities, and especially if it's a part of a larger social context in which you're being discriminated against or harmed in other ways. So I think that's really important.

The other thing is that counternarratives piece that I mentioned earlier. So one thing that's important is that if you feel like something like this is happening to you, it's important to reach out to social networks and talk to people about the experience, as hard as that may be, maybe a trusted friend or family member to begin with, to say, like, "Am I really crazy?" Because if someone's making you feel that way, probably they're the one doing something wrong. And so, I think that that's really important to seek out that counternarrative.

I think in terms of escaping or getting out of a relationship, especially if it's an intimate relationship, the resources that domestic violence advocates and organizations have been developing for many decades around how to escape an abusive relationship are really valuable here. And so, that's about creating a safety plan for when this kind of thing happens. Who can I call right away? Do I have access to transportation to leave the situation? If it's happening in a workplace, for example, do I have enough savings built up so I could leave this job even if I don't have something to hold me over in the meantime? So those kinds of safety planning so that you know, okay, if this gets bad enough, I would be able to leave the situation. Thinking ahead to that kind of thing can make you feel like you have more control over the situation.

Speaker 2:

During the month of May, we recognize and celebrate Mental Health Awareness Month. Could you share a little bit of your own perspective on Mental Health Awareness Month and what we should be focusing on as we reflect on our wellbeing?

Paige Sweet:

Yeah, I think that's a really good question. One of the most important findings, I think, of research on psychological abuse in general, or gaslighting specifically, is that the effects of these types of manipulations are worse for people who lack strong social networks or who lack material resources like money, transportation, things like that, which service protections.

I think that's what I want to focus on in something like Mental Health Awareness Month, is that we're actually less dependent on abusive people or abusive settings if we have access to a living wage, to childcare, to safe housing, to all of these material resources. So I think before we can talk about really mental health and wellbeing, we need the structural supports of that wellbeing.

That's what really studying this topic from a sociological perspective, since I'm trained as a sociologist, really brings, is that we need to have social context and structural supports that really promote wellbeing. So I think we can talk all we want about getting out and finding a better partner, but many of the people that I interview are stuck in these relationships, not because they don't want to leave but because they can't leave, because they don't have the material resources to be able to just pick up and go.

And so, I think that's what I want to cast some light on is that when we're talking about crises of mental health, crises of psychological abuse, we're often talking about crises of inequality. I think that that's a really important piece that I as a sociologist want to emphasize.

We all deserve self-determination. We all deserve autonomy. We all deserve to be able to realize our own wishes for our wellbeing. We all deserve to live lives free from manipulation, free from violence, but those things require certain social conditions to be able to achieve that. We're not all set up equally to be able to live lives free from violence and manipulation.

And so, I think we have to advocate for each other. We have to help build that for each other. People can't really be what I think of safe in your mind without the kind of material resources of safety. And so, that's what I try to focus on when I think about what does it mean to take a sociological approach to something like psychological abuse.

Speaker 2:

You've mentioned different resources and advocacy, but are there any supportive or educational resources specifically that you would like to mention?

Paige Sweet:

Yeah. I mean, again, like I said, one of the good things about this term becoming so popular is there's actually tons of great resources online. I would recommend the National Domestic Violence Hotline as a resource and website. So there's a hotline that you can actually physically pick up the phone and call, but you can also do a chat online and just talk to someone, a real person, about your experiences.

The thing is domestic violence advocates, whether or not you're also experiencing other features of domestic violence like physical abuse, domestic violence advocates are real experts in helping you figure out that mind-bending manipulation stuff, no matter who it's coming from, anyone in your life. It could be a friend or family member as well. They would be well-positioned to help you figure that kind of thing out.

So they also offer on their websites the National Domestic Violence Hotline, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. These kinds of resources offer websites or pages on their larger sites that describe what gaslighting is and might be able to help you figure out if that is indeed what's happening to you. So whether or not you reach out, you can at least seek information through those places.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. We will include that in our show notes and in the article that accompanies the podcast. As the podcast recording comes to a close, what is one thing that you hope all listeners remember from this conversation?

Paige Sweet:

I think I hope that people remember that gaslighting and psychological abuse don't take place in a vacuum, that they're part of a broader social context. It's important that we really pay attention to power differentials in those larger social contexts in order to really address something like gaslighting.

Speaker 2:

Is there anything else that you would like to share before we wrap up?

Paige Sweet:

No, I don't think so. I'm happy to be included in this. I think shining light on the mental health effects and the social effects of people's experiences of psychological abuse is ... It's really important to me and really core to the work that I do. So I'm really happy to be included.

Speaker 2:

Well, thank you so much, Dr. Sweet, for your time today. We greatly appreciate it.

Paige Sweet:

Thank you so much for having me.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #UMichImpact.