



From impertinence to impostorism. An analysis of *gaslighting* as positional injustice¹

De la impertinencia al impostorismo.
Un análisis del *gaslighting* como
injusticia posicional

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Abstract

This article proposes a critical reading of gaslighting and impostorism as relational effects of what will be termed *positional injustice*: a form of harm that simultaneously undermines a subject's epistemic and affective self-trust by systematically placing them in a position of testimonial invalidation. Drawing on a microfiction structured in three scenes (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood), the article examines some of the ways in which emotional silencing and cognitive disauthorization are articulated through everyday family practices that shape fragmented subjectivities, trapped between the desire to speak and the mandate to care. The article argues that the concept of positional injustice makes it possible to depathologize subjective phenomena that are usually understood as intrapsychic disorders, while providing a fertile framework for critically examining

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the ways in which relational harm becomes embodied and perpetuated through normalized patterns of interaction. The methodology employed is grounded in developments within narrativism and the affective turn, thereby foregrounding singular and situated forms of knowledge. Ultimately, the proposal seeks to challenge the frameworks of intelligibility that determine who is entitled to speak, what may be said, and under what conditions a person will be believed or silenced.

Keywords

Critical Epistemology; *Gaslighting*; Impostorism; Positional Injustice; Affective Narratives; Silencing.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura crítica del *gaslighting* y del síndrome del impostor como efectos relacionales de lo que se denominará *injusticia posicional*: una forma de daño que socava simultáneamente la autoconfianza epistémica y afectiva de un sujeto al ubicarlo sistemáticamente en un lugar de invalidez testimonial. A partir de una microficción estructurada en tres escenas (infancia, adolescencia y adultez), se examinan algunos de los modos en que el silenciamiento emocional y la desautorización cognoscitiva se articulan en prácticas familiares cotidianas que configuran subjetividades escindidas, atrapadas entre el deseo de decir y el mandato de cuidar. El artículo sostiene que el concepto de injusticia posicional permite despatologizar fenómenos subjetivos usualmente comprendidos como trastornos intrapsíquicos, y ofrece un marco fértil para pensar críticamente las maneras en que el agravio relacional se encarna y se perpetúa bajo actitudes normalizadas de interacción. La metodología empleada se inscribe en los desarrollos del *narrativismo* y el giro afectivo, lo cual otorga relieve a saberes singulares y situados. La propuesta apunta, finalmente, a disputar los marcos de inteligibilidad que determinan quién puede hablar, qué puede decir y en qué condiciones alguien será creído o silenciado.

Palabras clave

Epistemología crítica; *Gaslighting*; Impostorismo; Injusticia posicional; Narrativas afectivas; Silenciamiento.

Introduction

This article is grounded in the concept of positional injustice, understood as a form of relational harm in which a subject is simultaneously disauthorized in their capacity both to know and to feel. In situations of positional injustice, what is denied is not merely the validity of a particular testimony or emotional response; rather, the relational availability that sustains basic epistemic and affective self-trust is structurally eroded.

Positional injustice builds upon Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of *epistemic injustice*, which is not limited to informational deficits or individual cognitive errors, but instead constitutes a structural disauthorization of testimonial agency.² At the same time, it draws on the contributions of Alison Jaggar (1989) and Sara Ahmed (2004) regarding experiences of delegitimization that primarily involve affects, understood not as merely private phenomena but as singularized forms of knowledge. In a similar vein, Alexis Shotwell (2017) argues that various forms of knowledge—practical, affective, and embodied—are systematically devalued within hegemonic epistemic frameworks, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of dynamics of silencing and exclusion. Positional injustice thus articulates a dual fracture: an epistemic one, insofar as it undermines credibility and access to testimonial recognition; and an affective one, insofar as it invalidates the emotional responses of those undergoing a particular lived experience.

To illustrate this dynamic, the article draws on a microfiction structured in three scenes that succinctly narrate the biographical trajectory of an individual attempting to communicate an instance of intrafamilial abuse, only to encounter, in response, an arrogant form of silencing.

Such a trajectory makes it possible to understand how positional injustice—that is, being inexorably cast into a detrimental role—may crystallize over time and become configured in phenomena such as gaslighting and existential impostorism. These themes will be developed in the sections that follow through the analysis of a case presented in the form of a microfiction.

Methodology

The choice of microfiction as a methodological strategy in this study responds to the need to represent, with emotional density and narrative precision, complex relational dynamics that can scarcely be captured through abstract conceptual descriptions. In contexts of affective and

² Fricker (2007) distinguishes between two forms through which epistemic injustice may be expressed. One is testimonial injustice, which undermines a speaker's credibility and their access to recognition as a legitimate epistemic agent. The other is what Fricker terms hermeneutical injustice, which arises when an interpretive gap prevents the articulation or collective understanding of certain experiences. The framework of positional injustice may be read as an articulation of both dimensions, with particular emphasis on the testimonial dimension.

epistemic silencing, forms of harm manifest through microscopic signals, omissions, and subtle fractures that often elude traditional modes of analysis. For this reason, the case presented here is not employed as a literary example but rather as a device for reflective analysis.

The microfictional narrative makes it possible to stage processes of epistemic and affective disauthorization within concrete life situations. By condensing into brief episodes the progression of cumulative relational harm, the narrative device renders visible how the breakdown of relational availability ferments and intensifies over the course of years. In this sense, short fiction functions as a heuristic resource that not only illustrates the phenomena under examination but also fosters an experiential and affective understanding on the part of the reader.

From a critical epistemological perspective, the use of microfiction is likewise consistent with efforts to reclaim forms of knowledge that have historically been marginalized within dominant epistemic frameworks. Narrating these scenes does not trivialize the analysis; on the contrary, it restores the relational thickness of processes of harm, thereby opening pathways toward a deeper ethical reflection on the intersectional nature of injustice.

In sum, microfiction is employed here as a methodological strategy that enables the representation, analysis, and problematization of micropolitical forms of harm, allowing for engagement with their relational density. This methodological choice emerges at the intersection of two fundamental contemporary traditions.

On the One Hand, Narrativism and the Structuring of Experience:

Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984), Jerome Bruner (1991), and Adriana Cavarero (2000), this article assumes that narrative does not merely describe events but also organizes lived experience, conferring upon it temporal, affective, and ethical intelligibility. Narrative is therefore understood as a primary mode of knowing and world-making, particularly with regard to the constitution of the self and the social bond. Through its condensation and evocative power, fictional micronarrative makes it possible to represent the emotional textures and epistemic roles that shape trajectories of interpersonal harm.

On the Other Hand, the So-Called “Affective Turn” (*The affective turn*), as developed in the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Patricia Clough (2007), and Brian Massumi (2002), has challenged the rigid separation between reason and affect by demonstrating that affects are constitutive dimensions of knowledge, social action, and processes of subject formation. Affects are not merely internal responses but movements that configure bodies, relationships, and shared worlds. An analysis of relational harm therefore requires attention not only to explicit discourses but also to emotional intensities, silences, and affective positionings that organize experience.

From this perspective, the narrative makes it possible to show how positional injustice becomes inscribed in micro-everyday transactional practices that shape testimonial agency and emotional self-trust. Far from serving as a stylistic embellishment, the use of microfiction enables a situated understanding of practices of epistemic and affective exclusion, providing a space from which to reflect on the repair of relational bonds.

Theoretical framework

This study does not approach gaslighting or impostor syndrome as exclusively psychological or individual phenomena. Rather than reducing them to internal patterns of perception or self-esteem, we propose to analyze them as complex forms of injustice embedded in interactional dynamics that undermine the possibility of validating one's own perceptions, judgments, and right to feel. In other words, these phenomena will not be treated as intrapsychic disorders or dysfunctions, but as structured effects of specific interpersonal conditions that erode both a person's sense of testimonial competence and their basic sense of security.

This critical reading will subsequently allow us to articulate both phenomena as expressions of positional injustice, which constitutes the central hypothesis of this article. The theoretical framework that follows first presents contemporary approaches that conceptualize gaslighting as a relational and multidimensional process. It then examines impostor syndrome as the subjective outcome of these enduring forms of epistemic-affective harm.

Gaslighting as Epistemic and Affective Injustice

The notion of gaslighting has historically been used to describe acts of psychological manipulation through which a person is led to doubt their perception of reality³. Contemporary approaches, however, have refined this understanding by shifting the analysis from a purely individual perspective to a relational one. Gaslighting thus unfolds through repeated practices of invalidation, emotional distancing, and interpretive control, embedded within relationships characterized by affective asymmetries and social regimes of power. Consequently, it cannot be reduced to a merely clinical condition.

³ Although the term *gaslighting* has been widely adopted in contemporary psychological literature to account for dynamics of emotional manipulation and the distortion of subjective perception, it does not originate in the clinical field. The term derives from the play *Gas Light* (Hamilton, 1938) and, more notably, from its 1944 film adaptation (*Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor), in which the protagonist manipulates his wife into doubting her own sanity through a series of small, everyday actions disguised as harmless normality. The term's subsequent incorporation into the social sciences and mental health fields has made it possible to conceptualize new forms of relational violence in which harm stems not from physical aggression but from the systematic silencing and invalidation of another person's inner world.

Kate Abramson (2014) argues that the effectiveness of gaslighting depends upon the repeated enactment of practices that undermine authority—such as invalidation and ridicule—which gradually erode the victim’s capacity to trust their own maps of reality, as well as their memories and emotional states. An illustration of Abramson’s claim might occur when a person’s account of feeling mistreated is repeatedly and subtly trivialized. For example, statements such as “I don’t think that was right” or “That made me feel uncomfortable” may be met with responses such as “You’re always looking for problems” or “You take everything too personally.” These seemingly innocuous reactions foster suspicion regarding the reliability of one’s own judgment, to the point that the victim begins to question whether they truly saw what they saw or felt what they felt.

Robin Stern (2007) conceptualizes gaslighting as a dynamic cycle in which the victim’s need for affective validation is exploited in order to reinforce dependency upon the aggressor. Gaslighting feeds on the alternation between emotional invalidation and intermittent demonstrations of warmth or reconciliation, thereby creating a state of progressively increasing vulnerability. An illustrative example would be a situation in which an aggressor, after systematically denying the legitimacy of the victim’s emotions, offers occasional displays of affection, thus reinforcing both hope and self-doubt in the person experiencing the harm. Along similar lines, Amy Lewis Bear (2015) situates gaslighting as a structural component of patterns of emotional abuse. Rather than consisting of isolated incidents, it operates through cycles of emotional control in which victims become increasingly disoriented in their evaluation of reality and their own subjective worth, internalizing emotional uncertainty and weakening the foundations of testimonial self-affirmation.

Another particularly significant contribution in this area is that of José Medina (2013), who proposes the concept of denied epistemic friction to explain how gaslighting obstructs possibilities for cognitive and affective resistance. By preventing victims from formulating doubts, seeking interpretive support, or sustaining alternative perspectives, gaslighting interrupts the critical resistance processes necessary to preserve testimonial autonomy—that is, the capacity to be recognized as a legitimate epistemic subject within institutional spaces. Consider the following situation: a young researcher at an academic institution begins to notice that her ideas during team meetings are routinely ignored, only to receive approval when they are later repeated—almost verbatim—by a male colleague. When she cautiously expresses her frustration to the coordinator, he responds, “Don’t turn this into a gender issue; we value everyone’s ideas equally here.” Over time, each attempt to voice her perception of bias or exclusion is met with assertions that she is “overthinking things,” “looking for conflict,” or that she simply needs to “mature professionally.” These repeated responses not only invalidate her concerns but also deprive her of the motivation to speak with other colleagues, seek out mentors, or formulate a broader critique. The possibility of building interpretive alliances is foreclosed, and her discomfort becomes trapped within an individualizing and invalidating narrative. This example illustrates how gaslighting can operate

even in environments ostensibly dedicated to rational agency and critical reflection, while simultaneously preventing epistemic friction from developing into collective resistance, thereby extinguishing the possibility of constructing a non-complacent interpretation of events.

Impostorism as an Effect of Relational Harm

In its classical formulation, impostor syndrome has traditionally been characterized as a psychological phenomenon in which certain individuals, despite their objective accomplishments, experience a persistent sense of personal inauthenticity and a perceived lack of merit regarding those achievements, accompanied by a constant fear of being exposed as frauds.

Originally described by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978), the syndrome has largely been treated as a condition closely associated with internal patterns of self-imposed pressure and maladaptive perfectionism. However, it is essential to emphasize the relational processes of silencing, disauthorization, and gaslighting that make such experiences possible. In other words, this symptomatology does not emerge in a vacuum; it is incubated within relationships in which epistemic and affective self-affirmation has been persistently diminished. Victims come to normalize the messages of invalidation received through their primary interactions, gradually constructing a self that perceives itself as inadequate, deceptive, or fundamentally fraudulent.

Gaslighting creates the conditions under which feelings of imposture subsequently emerge—feelings that are often mistaken for mere problems of self-worth or “cognitive distortions.” Impostorism represents a form of cumulative relational harm in which the very structure of recognition—both self-recognition and recognition by others—has been severely eroded. It may therefore be understood as a sedimentation of relational injury resulting from the internalization of interpersonal experiences that have undermined not only testimonial self-confidence but also the perception of one’s own emotional efficacy.

Alexis Shotwell’s (2017) work on embodied forms of knowledge is particularly relevant for understanding this process. Shotwell argues that ways of knowing grounded in the body, emotions, and lived histories are frequently disauthorized within dominant epistemic frameworks. From this perspective, the experience of feeling like an impostor can be understood as the manifestation of a profound rupture between the subject’s embodied knowledge and the social regimes that govern epistemic validation. Consider the following example. During a seminar on critical theory, a student remarks that while reading a text on migration, she could not help but think about her own family history: her father and two brothers crossed the border without documentation, walking through the desert for days, while she remained unaware of their whereabouts for more than a

month. She recounts this experience without dramatization, almost as though wondering whether such an experience might itself count as a form of knowledge. The professor nods kindly but responds: “That is interesting as an emotional point of departure, but let’s focus on the structural argument of the text.” The class moves on. No one returns to the student’s comment.

Without openly discrediting her, the message conveyed by the group is clear: her experience does not fall within the legitimate frameworks of knowledge production. Situated knowledge—shaped by the body, migratory history, and emotion—is relegated to the realm of the anecdotal or the private. Although the student has mastered the text and is fully capable of constructing rigorous arguments, she begins to wonder whether her way of understanding truly “counts.” Her body registers the shift: she participates less frequently, hesitates before speaking, and searches for more neutral ways of contributing. This is precisely what Shotwell identifies as a rupture between embodied knowledge and the social regimes of epistemic validation.

In sum, impostorism should be understood as a relational consequence of persistent practices of epistemic-affective silencing (gaslighting) that split the subject and place them before two mutually exclusive forms of knowledge: on the one hand, their experiential knowledge—vivid, yet rendered irrelevant; and on the other, socially sanctioned knowledge—abstract and dissonant, yet deemed “relevant.”

Results and discussion

Three-Scene Microfiction

In order to explore, in a situated and sensitive manner, the processes of disauthorization that underlie gaslighting and impostorism, a microfiction structured in three scenes is presented below. As previously noted, this brief narrative is not intended to conceptually illustrate the phenomena under analysis, but rather to render visible, through emotional and everyday registers, the progression of an injury that remained unrepaired despite the passage of time, generating a cumulative “snowball effect.”

Through life episodes unfolding during the protagonist’s childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the narrative portrays the crystallization of practices of inferiorization, exclusion, and subjugation that create the conditions of possibility for the emergence of what will later be termed positional injustice.

In the first scene, entitled “Don’t Say It,” a five-year-old girl tells her mother about a physical discomfort: “Mommy, it burns when I pee,” and reveals that this has been happening ever since her uncle began playing the “magic tunnel” game with her. The mother’s reaction is not one of explicit denial but of complete evasion. While cooking, she remains silent, turns her gaze toward the small transom window, forcefully closes the lid of the pot, and never establishes eye contact with the child. She does not say things such as “That’s not true” or “Tell me what happened”; she simply does not respond, allowing the weight of silence to settle between them.

The afternoon unfolds within a dense atmosphere of emotional confinement. The mother remains lying in her darkened bedroom, a cold cloth soaked in vinegar resting on her forehead, while a radio plays softly in the background.

Later, when the father arrives home, the mother does not mention the child’s disclosure. Instead, she limits herself to discussing a household problem: the refrigerator is leaking water, flooding the kitchen floor. In this way, the drama is displaced into a mundane complaint, rendering both the child’s pain and her testimony invisible. The girl, silently witnessing the scene, experiences her mother’s soul as cold as the water dripping from the refrigerator.

In the second scene, entitled “Be Nice,” the protagonist, now a sixteen-year-old adolescent, is compelled to visit the same uncle mentioned in the previous scene, who has recently become widowed. Her mother’s suggestion—“Let’s go visit him. He’s very lonely”—provokes an immediate visceral reaction: a knot in her stomach that reconnects her to childhood experiences. Upon arriving, the uncle embraces her with a lingering, warm hand, bringing back memories of childhood whispers: “Do what your uncle likes, and don’t tell anyone.”

At that moment, the young woman experiences a cascade of emotions that spontaneously become embodied. Her body stiffens, her legs weaken, and the affective world of her childhood bursts back into consciousness. Yet any possibility of expressing her discomfort is immediately neutralized by her mother’s rebuke: “Don’t be rude.” Thus, the mother not only ignores the bodily signals of distress but also demands an affective performance of normality, reactivating the logic of silencing and self-censorship.

Throughout the visit, the adolescent speaks only when necessary, while her body seems to speak in silence through the growling in her stomach. She comes to understand that her pain is not merely invisible but also inconvenient—something that must be suppressed in order to preserve the family image.

In the third scene, “You Never Have Peace,” the protagonist, now forty-two years old, confronts yet another instance of displacement and denial. A trivial disagreement about a forgotten date—a relative’s birthday—gives way to a nostalgic remark from her mother: “Your uncle was always the one who remembered everyone’s birthday! He was so good with children!”

This comment brutally trivializes the daughter's history of suffering. Overcome by a surge of long-suppressed anger, the protagonist does not restrain herself and replies: "That disgusting old pervert!" Yet her mother's response is not an attempt to understand the emotional outburst, but rather to reposition her daughter: "My poor brother! You can't even let the dead rest in peace!" declares the octogenarian, once again casting her daughter in the role of the irreverent one rather than the wounded one.

Following this confrontation, the mother resumes her daily teatime ritual—spreading jam on toast and casually remarking that "it's only seven o'clock and it's already almost dark"—as though nothing significant has occurred. This indifference, cloaked in the harmlessness of everyday routine, seals the affective distance that has traversed the protagonist's entire life.

Gaslighting and Impostorism as Positional Injustice: Analysis of the Case

This three-scene microfiction—spanning childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—provides a privileged lens through which to examine the gradual progression of cognitive and emotional degradation through what will here be called epistemicidal maneuvers. The term reflects the denial of a person's epistemic standing in both cognitive and affective terms: the subject is treated as incompetent to know what is happening to them and what they are feeling. This repeated placement of the subject in a position of non-knowing constitutes a precondition for the relational deterioration that ultimately contributes to the loss of self-trust underlying both gaslighting and impostorism.

For this reason, these phenomena can be framed within the concept of positional injustice, which describes the inexorable placement of a subject within a relational role that harms them both epistemically and affectively. Such injustice operates through dismissive micro-movements that can easily go unnoticed when viewed superficially or in isolation.

In the case presented here, one can observe how a long-standing interactional style between a daughter and her mother effectively instills in the daughter self-doubt regarding both her knowledge and her feelings, while simultaneously fostering guilt.

We propose here a deeper immersion into the narrative in order to underscore the significance of seemingly minor gestures that, scene by scene, gradually instill a state of confusion through which memory becomes blurred and conveniently softened.

Scene I: The First Epistemic and Affective Displacement

The first major displacement occurs during childhood, when the girl discloses a physical symptom associated with a supposed game involving an adult. What she says subtly hints at the existence of at least an aggressive, abnormal form of play. The mother's reaction produces a form of displaced silencing: she does not verbally deny the testimony, but she avoids eye contact, redirects her attention toward the transom window, and channels the tension toward external objects (the flies, the kitchen). This non-response is, in itself, an act of disauthorization. The testimony is neither answered, validated, nor investigated. The child is not accused of lying, yet neither is she believed, nor is any curiosity shown regarding what she is trying to communicate.

Moreover, the forceful slamming of the pot lid, the mother's subsequent somatization (the headache and self-isolation in her room), and the change of subject in the father's presence (speaking about the refrigerator rather than the abuse) consolidate a framework of emotional expulsion in which the real conflict is suppressed and replaced by trivial domestic concerns.

This initial movement deposits uncertainty within the child regarding the legitimacy of her own experience without ever explicitly telling her that she is mistaken. She is excluded from the sphere of affective relevance, producing an initial weakening of her perceptual and testimonial self-confidence.

Yet beyond relegating her account to the realm of the unheard, the situation also instills affective guilt through the mother's emotional collapse. The child is left in a position from which she may feel that she is bad because she has made her mother so ill and because her uncle may now feel deeply disappointed by what she said.

Scene II: The Internalization of Self-Silencing and Internal Displacement

By the age of sixteen, the protagonist has already internalized mechanisms of self-silencing. Her body recoils at the suggestion of visiting her uncle ("my stomach twisted into knots"), yet she does not verbally express her discomfort. From an external perspective, one might ask: why does she not refuse? It is important to understand that the displacement now occurs within herself. The knot in her stomach does not translate into the adoption of an autonomous, self-determined position. She does not oppose her mother's wishes; instead, she restrains herself. Her response neither fully consents nor openly refuses. It is a "yes," but one that is forced, rationalized, and disconnected from the message conveyed by her sensory and bodily experience.

The mother actively reinforces this self-silencing by demanding the preservation of social appearances: “Don’t be rude.” The maternal injunction functions as an update of the childhood pattern: what one feels can never be more important than what one ought to do. Codes of politeness and docility admit no exceptions. The uncle’s emotional aggression, reawakened through the embrace and the resurfacing of childhood memories, cannot be confronted or validated; it must be concealed beneath norms of empathy, understanding, kindness, and “good manners.”

This second silencing deepens the original injury. Not only is the pain disauthorized, but its active denial is demanded. The young woman’s body suffers (“my stomach growled”), yet her voice remains silent. Here a second layer of gaslighting takes shape, now internalized: her own bodily and emotional perceptions come to be regarded by her as diffuse, inappropriate, discordant, and illegitimate sensations.

Scene III: The Consolidation of Self-Doubt and the Fracturing of the Testimonial Bond

In adulthood, the protagonist finally breaks the pact of silence and openly confronts her mother (“That disgusting old pervert!”). Yet the mother’s response does not acknowledge the harm. Instead, it reinstates the logic of culpabilizing inversion: “You can’t even let the dead rest in peace!” The reproach once again inscribes the conflict within the victim’s supposed moral failing rather than within the wrongdoing of the perpetrator.

The maternal act of calmly returning to her tea and commenting on the approaching darkness (after such a confrontation) crystallizes a pattern of structural affective indifference. The pain does not interrupt the flow of everyday life; it does not generate a narrative rupture. It is as though it does not deserve to become a subject of discussion. By emphasizing routine and habit, the emotional collapse is diluted, and the triviality of the harm is reaffirmed.

It is at this point that the dynamics of gaslighting reach completion. The daughter has not only been systematically disauthorized in her perceptions and feelings; she has also been led to experience her own emotions as transgressions. The result is a form of epistemic and affective ostracism in which both her truth and her suffering are denied a legitimate place within the shared world. Her mother’s comment once again places her in the position of being “the one who is wrong,” from which the adult daughter can easily become lost in the haze of self-doubt: “Is it wrong, at this stage of life, to reopen such an old issue?” “Shouldn’t she have moved on and forgotten about it by now?” “Is this a vindictive attitude toward this elderly mother?” “And what about her father? Should she have told him as well?” “Has she treated her mother

unfairly by placing this accusation solely on her while shielding her father from such a secret?”
“Is she a resentful and heartless daughter for trying to prevail over a mother who is now frail and diminished?”

Within such a context, *gaslighting* operates almost imperceptibly as a form of disorientation. The daughter does not doubt what happened; rather, she doubts her right to name it—and to name it again. She also becomes suspicious of the legitimacy of her own voice, which may come to feel inappropriate or unworthy. Thus, the harm lies not only—or even primarily—in the silence that was imposed upon her, but in the fact that this silence has become an internal criterion. The daughter wonders whether she is being cruel or untimely. The result is not merely confusion but a sophisticated form of self-suspicion, in which even the attempt to heal may come to appear as an act of selfish betrayal.

Within an interactional system as intimate and recursively reinforced as that of this mother-daughter dyad, breaking the silence does not simply mean speaking; it means challenging a relational dance that has been sustained for decades. At this point, it is necessary to fully appreciate the inertial force of the interactional system created and preserved by the dyad—a system grounded in a tacit agreement not to name the pain. The silence between mother and daughter is not a passive void but an organized, coordinated silence, one jointly woven by both parties (“I won’t ask, and you won’t tell”). This makes it possible to observe how individuals can gradually adapt to a way of managing antagonism in which denial becomes a mechanism of mutual adaptation to the unspeakable. In other words, this type of relational ecology reveals that denial is not a unidirectional phenomenon but a relational one: it takes only one person to confess, but it takes two to sustain a denial.

The peculiar situation of actively avoiding a truth that others might regard as undeniable—and becoming so accustomed to that silencing that it becomes invisible—requires an extraordinary degree of control over conversations and interactions. Preserving such a delicate secret over an extended period necessitates quietly restricting any reference to “the unspeakable,” however indirect it may be. The form of communication that tends to prevail in such environments is the opposite of spontaneity: what is said and what is left unsaid must be carefully weighed and measured. Deep conversations become dangerous, information is dispensed only in fragments, and meaningful exchanges are replaced by casual talk that prevents access to the depth of the pain, particularly when that pain originates in a compromising past. The co-organized silence may thus be replaced—and concealed—by a kind of conspiratorial noise (such as the radio playing softly in the darkness, interrupting an unbearable silence for a mother who was physically present but emotionally unavailable in the face of her daughter’s suffering).

Living alongside a truth that no one speaks about is like learning to move around a room in whose center stands a large elephant that must constantly be avoided, while no one dares mention its presence—an enormous presence that is as impossible to ignore as it is to name. Not only is speaking about the abuse tacitly prohibited; speaking about the prohibition itself is likewise forbidden. In other words, silence is imposed upon the silence, denial is denied: ignoring the elephant is itself the elephant. Violating the rule that organizes the interactional system—that epistemic-affective dance—can have destabilizing consequences because it alters the original positions occupied by the participants, much like a change in choreography. Consider, for example, the following scenario.

Original Sequence: The daughter (B) communicates information that the mother (A) denies. The daughter begins to distrust herself, feels guilty for hurting her mother, and questions her own loyalty. She silences herself and restrains her emotions. The conflict with (A) is softened, the asymmetry remains intact, and the relationship survives.

The risks involved in violating the pattern of co-silencing and subverting the established role structure are not easy to identify. On the one hand, disclosure and the acceptance of a shared truth could generate a significant epistemic gain by reducing the daughter's cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, if that attempt at honesty fails and results in the mother's emotional collapse, it may intensify the daughter's sense of being cruel, disappointing, and unworthy. This fear of disappointing others constitutes the core of impostorism, insofar as it drags the subject into an ungovernable need to prove—to others and to oneself—that one is indeed capable of meeting the expectations and needs of the other.

The Cycle of Hell: Positional Injustice and Ontological Marginality

To recapitulate, the protagonist of the microfiction experiences her first forms of testimonial and affective disauthorization during childhood (the first moment). Her act of bearing witness—"It burns when I pee"; "ever since Uncle started playing the magic tunnel game with me"—is met with maternal silence and indifference. It is important to emphasize that a non-response is still a response. Within the relational dance, even immobility generates movement. By saying nothing, the mother says a great deal. She conveys a tacit message: "We do not talk about this," "This did not happen," "This does not exist." That semiotic burden, directed toward the child's body, remains as a trace of what she was not permitted to know or feel. The mother's mutism is therefore not an absence but a specific form of response: a delegitimizing response that fails to receive the testimony and redirects its affective and epistemic significance toward a non-place—

the very core of the positional injustice in which the child becomes trapped. This response does not manifest itself as open rejection, warning, or reprimand. Rather, it takes the form of an absence of availability that nullifies the child's epistemic and affective existence.

All human behavior in interaction communicates something, including indifference and inaction.⁴ Looking away, abruptly changing the subject, or forcefully slamming the lid of a pot shut are fully communicative acts when confronted with a disclosure that is saturated with meaning. The relational effects such actions can generate may be just as powerful as an insult, a scream, a punch against a door, or a slap across the face. This maternal silencing intensifies and reinforces the foundational act of gaslighting experienced by the child within the abusive relationship established by the uncle. It is important to note that the aggressor—the uncle—systematically fails to acknowledge the signs of discomfort, distress, and confusion that the child expresses through her body while they “play.” Rather than responding to her nervousness, lack of enjoyment, or nonverbal resistance, the uncle constructs a communicative situation in which the only valid interpretation is the one he imposes: that they are merely “playing.” This systematic omission of what is plainly evident functions as a primary form of *gaslighting* because it denies the legitimacy of the child's feelings, disauthorizes her capacity for affective interpretation, and generates a discrepancy between what she experiences and what she is supposedly expected to feel according to the imposed framework. Such repeated, sustained dissociation—legitimized by the family environment—prefigures positional injustice by producing a fragmented subjectivity that doubts its own perceptions and gradually comes to assume that the problem lies within the self rather than within the surrounding environment. In other words, the uncle initiates a course of action that promotes positional injustice, both epistemic and affective in nature, and the mother's response follows the same trajectory. Although her attitude does not itself constitute abuse, neither does it interrupt it. This first experience of disauthorization endured by the child—perpetrated by two adult figures from whom protective care is expected, namely her mother and her uncle—creates a rupture in her basic trust in her own interpretation of events and in the legitimacy of her suffering.

During adolescence (the second moment), the microfiction reveals continuity in this dynamic of self-silencing. The young woman maintains emotional distance from her mother, unable either to make demands or to seek repair. The affective bond remains eroded, and she refrains from expressing her fears or grievances. This phase reflects the internalization of gaslighting: the internal voice that doubts itself has replaced the external agent. Explicit disauthorization is no longer necessary; silencing now operates from within, in the form of structural self-distrust. The corrosive effects of relational gaslighting operating over many years could easily be mistaken for rational doubts. In reality, they are eruptions of a mode of functioning permeated by cognitive and affective ambivalence, leading the adolescent into conflict and self-blame: “Isn't it unfair to judge

⁴ This argument follows the perspective according to which all interaction communicates and every manifestation—or omission—carries semiotic value (Bateson, 1972). See also Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967).

my uncle solely because of that? What about the good memories, such as when he took us to the ice-skating show because I had always dreamed of seeing it? Am I being cruel to my mother by expecting from her a strength she simply does not possess?”

Thus, once *gaslighting* becomes structural, it no longer requires explicit denial on every occasion. Instead, it establishes a subjective matrix through which the victim herself reproduces the gaze that disauthorizes her. What was lived is not entirely denied, yet neither can it be affirmed without remorse. The affective ambivalence and learned emotional silencing reflect the adolescent's moral dilemma as she attempts to integrate the traumatic with the loving within a framework that inhibits the full validation of her experience.

It is here that an impostorist stance begins to take shape as an affective-cognitive structure: the adolescent experiences a disjunction between her intimate perception of injustice—already attenuated—and her inability to sustain that perception as legitimate in the eyes of others.

In adulthood (the third moment), what unfolds is a paradoxical form of dual loyalty. On the one hand, the daughter lives in an era in which feminist discourse and child-protection frameworks have fostered new ways of naming abuse and interrupting cycles of silence. The figure of the “disgusting old pervert” thus emerges as an expression of rupture: a critical stance toward a form of violence that, for years, had been impossible to identify openly. On the other hand, her loyalty toward her mother persists with equal force. The mother remains an ambiguous and suffering figure whose emotional fragility the protagonist continues to protect.

When the mother reacts with anger or denial at the mention of the uncle, the relational pattern of silencing is reactivated (“You can’t even let the dead rest in peace!”). And the daughter, despite having taken a step toward speech, retreats once again; she returns to caring for the other. What unfolds here is no longer merely the lingering effect of the original gaslighting. Rather, it is the eruption of an affective impostorism that intensifies the experience of not being a “good daughter,” the perceived need to demonstrate love through the renunciation of complaint, and the fear of causing harm or being rejected. Emotionally caring for the perpetrator or for passive witnesses functions as a strategy for preserving relationships that once constituted the individual's only reference points for affection and belonging.

Sara Ahmed (2017) is particularly relevant here. She has shown how, in familial and social contexts governed by the imperative of harmony, the woman who names violence is perceived as breaking an affective bond of loyalty and is cast as the one who “ruins the moment” or “hurts the family.” Judith Herman (1992), for her part, has demonstrated how many survivors oscillate between the impulse to speak and the terror of the relational consequences that such speech may entail, since interpersonal trauma is lodged precisely within the fabric that binds and sustains significant relationships. Likewise, Alicia Puleo (2011) warns that the ethic of care historically

assigned to women—as mothers, daughters, and wives—has functioned as a mechanism of emotional subordination by demanding that concern for others override the affirmation of one’s own suffering.

Within this tension between two moral systems—one that legitimizes disclosure and another that demands the preservation of relationships at the expense of the self—subjectivity is torn apart. Speaking becomes possible, but not without guilt; remaining silent, though familiar, is no longer entirely bearable. The adult woman thus remains trapped within a gray zone where repair remains out of reach and attachment still exerts too powerful a hold.

The analysis of the three scenes therefore demonstrates how gaslighting not only disrupts the interpretation of reality in specific moments but, when tolerated over time, shapes subjectivities marked by epistemic-affective exile and by a profound sense of existential impostorism. This manifests as the experience of being “out of place” whenever one attempts to occupy a space of demand, speech, disagreement, or truth-telling. Such impostorism does not arise spontaneously; rather, it is assimilated as an affective role, a survival strategy in contexts where discord threatens to fracture relationships or destabilize the emotional equilibrium of the family. Subjectivity thus becomes molded by an imperative of silent accommodation: yielding, withdrawing, not being “too intense,” not being difficult, not confronting. Put differently, this is a form of positional learning that teaches a person that occupying the center—being heard, believed, and supported—is not available to them, and that any attempt to do so will be interpreted as excess or ingratitude.

This deeply rooted feeling fosters a structural disposition toward self-erasure. The individual not only doubts what they felt but withdraws from conflict before it even begins, convinced either that they have no right to be there or that their presence will cause more harm than repair. In the words of Berenice Fisher (1992), the harmed subject learns to “negotiate their being” within systems that demand silence as the price of belonging. Marilyn Frye (1983) has described this experience as relational falsity: an affective structure that requires one to appear whole when broken, to smile when in pain, and to remain silent when something burns within. From the perspective of critical epistemology, Kristie Dotson (2011) identifies in this process a form of preemptive self-silencing, resulting from having been systematically ignored, discredited, or displaced.

This, in turn, renews a cycle of imposture. In the case analyzed here, the daughter feels compelled to prove constantly that she deserves to be there—that she is sufficiently good, sufficiently caring, sufficiently grateful. This is not a situational insecurity but an affective form of ontological marginality, in which one’s worth is perpetually in question and must be validated from the outside. As Devon Price (2022) and Moya Bailey (2021) have argued, what is commonly referred to as “impostor syndrome” is, more than an individual pathology, a structural consequence

of historically inhabiting spaces of affective, epistemic, and moral exclusion. Caught between the need to speak and the mandate to care, subjectivity becomes suspended between guilt, withdrawal, and the struggle to claim a voice of its own.

Conclusion

The analytical path proposed in this article has made it possible to illuminate how gaslighting and impostorism, far from being individual or episodic phenomena, constitute concrete manifestations of positional injustice that unfold over time through minute, persistent, and emotionally insidious relational practices. The use of microfiction as a reflective device enabled the capture of the gradual solidification of an affective and epistemic bond capable of transforming externally imposed doubt into self-distrust, and prescribed silence into self-silencing.

The child who once said, “It burns when I pee,” and received no response becomes an adolescent who remains silent in order not to cause discomfort, and later an adult who interrupts herself for fear of distressing her mother. This trajectory cannot be adequately explained in terms of individual weakness. Rather, it must be understood in relation to complex interactional experiences in which both knowing and feeling were systematically disauthorized. In this sense, the figure of the impostor does not embody a false identity but a divided subjectivity, compelled to perform a form of belonging that requires the renunciation of its own truth.

From this perspective, the concept of positional injustice reveals its considerable theoretical and micropolitical value by shifting attention away from internal deficits and toward the relational conditions that produce an entire intersectional spectrum of epistemic and affective oppressions culminating in self-erasure. This conceptual framework opens new possibilities for critical understanding and ethical intervention. The task is not to medicalize the wound, but to interpret it as the embodied effect of relationships that failed in their responsibilities of recognition, support, and validation.

This study has sought to demonstrate that there is no way to understand experiences of delegitimization without attending to the interactional choreographies that sustain them: disciplining silences, diverted gazes, and tacit norms that punish disruption. Gaslighting is not merely manipulation; it is a relational pedagogy of not-knowing. Likewise, impostorism is not merely insecurity; it is the effect of having been placed—again and again—at the margins of what is considered believable and worthy of love. To name these forms of harm is to challenge the frameworks of intelligibility that determine who may speak, what may be said, and with what consequences.

From this standpoint, if both *gaslighting* and impostorism are to be understood as relational phenomena, their repair cannot be limited to individual interventions aimed at cognitive restructuring. It is essential to shift interpretation away from a deficit-based and pathologizing logic toward a relational and contextual reading, acknowledging that these phenomena are not symptoms of a fragile self but structural effects of systems of unjust and exclusionary asymmetries. Herein lies the depathologizing potential of the proposed framework: relocating distress not in order to trivialize it, but to reinscribe it within its micropolitical geography, thereby opening pathways that move beyond strengthening individual resilience and instead cultivate networks of relational availability in which epistemic and affective recognition are neither conditional nor vulnerable to violation.

Positional justice, in its dual epistemic and affective dimensions, should therefore be understood as the restoration of basic trust in one's own knowing and feeling, contributing to an indispensable ethical horizon for confronting the consequences of positional harm. Ultimately, this horizon entails reimagining relationships that not only recognize voices and suffering but also actively enable the reconstruction of fragmented subjectivities.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest with any institution, organization, or commercial association of any kind.

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