

Caring Words, Silenced Voices: Paternalistic Discourse and Benevolent Gaslighting in an Indonesian Education Service Company

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ABSTRACT

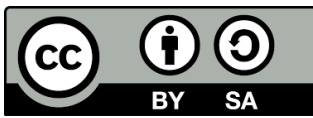
Background: Education service companies in Indonesia project an identity as agents of national development while subjecting employees to communicative practices that undermine well-being.

Objective: This study investigates how paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting operate as mutually reinforcing verbal strategies in supervisor-subordinate communication. It further documents the psychosocial consequences employees report. The study proposes an integrated analytical framework that adapts existing concepts rather than introducing a wholly new one, developed from a single site and offered for testing elsewhere.

Method: A qualitative single-site case study anchored in Fairclough's (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis framework was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty current and former employees of one Indonesian education service company, eliciting verbatim supervisory utterances and reported effects.

Results: Four benevolent gaslighting strategies were identified: trivializing, diverting, countering, and blocking, each operating through distinct mechanisms including inclusive pronoun misuse and institutional access restriction. Paternalistic discourse constructed a discursive precondition of deference, enabling gaslighting to function unrecognized. Together, both strategies are interpreted as forming a quadrilateral discursive trap constraining employees through hierarchical authority, cultural deference, mission ideology, and internalized self-doubt. Six psychosocial impacts were documented: chronic self-doubt, moral disorientation, communicative withdrawal, silent resignation, psychosomatic symptoms, and difficulty re-trusting leadership.

Conclusion: These findings are interpretive and drawn from one organization, so they are not statistically generalizable; they offer evidence for HR practitioners and policymakers relevant to SDG 8 Target 8.8 and SDG 4.7.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational life, language is rarely neutral. The words chosen by those in positions of authority carry ideological weight, shaping how employees understand themselves, their work, and their relationships with the institution. This is particularly pronounced in Indonesia's education service sector, where organizations often construct a dual identity: externally, as enlightened agents of national development; internally, as hierarchical structures in which loyalty, endurance, and deference are expected of employees. Within this paradox, a specific communicative phenomenon has begun to attract scholarly attention: the

strategic deployment of apparently caring, supportive language by supervisors that, upon closer examination, functions to invalidate employees' perceptions, suppress their legitimate concerns, and sustain asymmetrical power relations. Despite its prevalence in practice, this phenomenon remains severely under-theorized in Indonesian organizational discourse studies.

Recent global scholarship has established that workplace gaslighting, a form of communicative manipulation in which an individual in power causes a subordinate to doubt their own judgment, memory, or perception, is a serious and measurable organizational problem. Kukreja and Pandey (2023) were among the first to conceptualize and develop a validated scale for workplace gaslighting, defining it as a pattern of behavior that systematically distorts a target's perception of reality in professional contexts. Their work, situated within the supervisor-subordinate dynamic, established that workplace gaslighting operates differently from interpersonal gaslighting in intimate relationships, relying instead on institutional authority and organizational norms as its primary enabling conditions. Building on this, Omran and Yousafzai (2024) noted that the phenomenon remains under-researched and under-theorized, especially in non-Western organizational contexts where cultural deference to authority may amplify its effects. More recently, a comprehensive construct review by Popat and Pandey (2026) confirmed that while gaslighting research has expanded into politics, healthcare, and sociology, its linguistic mechanisms, particularly in the context of Asian organizations, remain largely unexplored. The construct has since been traced across several institutional domains. Abramson (2014) set out the philosophical structure of gaslighting as an attack on a target's standing as a knower, Sebring (2021) documented its operation in Western health care, and Storm and Muhr (2023) showed how organizational silence allows epistemic injustice at work to be sustained by the complicity of bystanders rather than by the perpetrator alone. These accounts converge on the point that gaslighting is an institutional as much as an interpersonal phenomenon, a reading that extends the original formulation of the gaslight effect in interpersonal relationships (Stern, 2018).

A particularly insidious variant of this phenomenon is what scholars have termed benevolent gaslighting the use of ostensibly warm, empathic, and supportive language to achieve the same invalidating effect as overtly hostile manipulation. Unlike conventional gaslighting, which is recognizable through denial or aggression, benevolent gaslighting operates through the very idiom of care. Prasad and Maraj (2022), in their award-winning work on epistemic violence in institutional discourse, demonstrated how language that appears to advocate for others can simultaneously enact subtle but profound forms of silencing. The employee who is told, "I understand your frustration, and because I trust you, I am asking you to handle this," cannot easily identify the manipulation embedded within what sounds like recognition and confidence. This linguistic ambiguity renders benevolent gaslighting exceptionally difficult to resist and, consequently, particularly damaging to employee well-being. The education sector has received particular attention in this respect. Zembylas (2024) describes affective gaslighting in educational settings as a mechanism through which structural injustice is recast as individual oversensitivity, and Patterson and Matias (2025) document the same pattern in academia, where invalidation and denial operate on women of colour through a register of concern rather than hostility. Alvesson and Einola (2022) make the parallel argument about leadership discourse itself, showing how the vocabulary of authenticity can be turned to the manipulation it claims to preclude.

Scholars of organizational communication have long recognized a related concept: paternalistic discourse, in which authority figures position themselves as benevolent guardians of their subordinates, framing institutional decisions as acts of parental wisdom rather than exercises of organizational power. Yusmen et al. (2024), drawing on a systematic review of paternalistic leadership across educational and corporate institutions, found that while benevolent aspects of paternalistic leadership are often associated with positive organizational commitment, they simultaneously constrain employee voice and autonomy, particularly in Asian cultural contexts. Similarly, Nassir and Benoliel (2023) demonstrated that in educational institutions specifically, paternalistic leadership creates structural conditions in which employees experience both gratitude and entrapment, a psychoemotional bind that suppresses the articulation of grievances. In Indonesia, this dynamic is further reinforced by cultural norms such as *ewuh pakewuh* (reluctance to impose or refuse) and *nrimo* (acceptance of one's lot), which render the linguistic performance of hierarchy not merely tolerable but morally valorized. The Indonesian and wider Asian evidence on paternalistic leadership is consistent with this reading. Irawanto et al. (2012) traced the benevolent, moral and authoritarian dimensions of paternalistic leadership through the Indonesian public sector, Chaudhary et al. (2023) found that paternalistic leaders promote knowledge sharing only where psychological safety is already present, Wang et al. (2022) showed that the effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice depends on whether information is shared downward, Huang et al. (2023) found the harm of authoritarian leadership conditional on the leader's perceived capability, and Lee et al. (2024) examined its benevolent, moral and authoritarian aspects within the job demands-resources model. Taken together, these studies indicate that paternalism is not uniformly benign or harmful; what matters is the communicative conditions under which it is enacted, which is precisely what a discourse-analytic approach is positioned to examine.

This study situates itself within the broader United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Target 8.8, which calls for the protection of labour rights and the promotion of safe and secure working environments for all workers. A working environment in which communication is systematically weaponized against employees, even through apparently supportive language, constitutes a form of psychosocial harm that directly undermines the conditions necessary for decent work. Furthermore, the context of education service companies in Indonesia makes this a matter of concern under SDG 4.7 as well: organizations that position themselves as stewards of learning while subjecting their own employees to communicative manipulation embody a profound institutional contradiction that warrants critical scholarly attention. Data from Indonesia's central statistics agency (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2023) documented a continuing rise in service-sector employment, with education services among the fastest-growing segments, making this an urgent and socially significant domain of inquiry.

Despite the growing body of literature on workplace gaslighting (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023; Omran & Yousafzai, 2024), paternalistic organizational discourse (Yusmen et al., 2024; Nassir & Benoliel, 2023), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2008), including its application in Indonesian contexts (Nuzula et al., 2022) and to classroom power relations (Wei & Sandaran, 2023), the intersection of these phenomena within Indonesian education service companies appears not to have been examined. This claim is bounded by the search on which it rests: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and the Indonesian national

portal Garuda were searched for combinations of gaslighting, paternalistic leadership or discourse, critical discourse analysis, and Indonesia, for the period 2010 to 2026, and no study combining all four elements was retrieved. The claim should be read as the result of that search rather than as an absolute statement about the literature. Most gaslighting research has been conducted in Western institutional settings and relies on psychological measurement instruments rather than close linguistic analysis of actual communicative events; the epistemic-injustice strand is a partial exception, having examined gaslighting in non-Western and non-corporate settings (Omran & Yousafzai, 2024; Smolović Jones, 2023). Meanwhile, Indonesian CDA scholarship has focused predominantly on political speech and media discourse, leaving the internal communicative practices of organizations largely unexamined. This study addresses that gap by bringing together paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting as a unified analytical framework and applying it to a single-site case study of an Indonesian education service company.

Two research questions guide this study. First: what linguistic strategies constitute paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting in supervisor-subordinate communication within the studied organization? Second: What psychosocial effects do employees report as consequences of these communicative practices? By centering employee voices through semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty (20) current and former employees, this study foregrounds the lived experience of those subjected to these discursive strategies, generating data that is both linguistically analyzable and empirically grounded. The contribution of this study is threefold: it extends gaslighting scholarship into the domain of organizational linguistics; it proposes a combined analytical framework of paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting, developed in one Indonesian organization and offered for testing in other Global South organizational contexts; and it provides actionable evidence for human resource practitioners and policymakers working to improve psychosocial safety in Indonesian workplaces.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative single-site case study design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following the three-dimensional analytical framework developed by Fairclough (2003), which examines discourse simultaneously as text, as discursive practice, and as social practice. This framework was selected because it positions language not as a transparent medium of communication, but as a site in which institutional power relations are reproduced, contested, and naturalized, a theoretical orientation that is directly relevant to the investigation of paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting within organizational settings. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty (20) purposively selected participants comprising current and former employees of a single Indonesian education service company, referred to throughout this paper as EduCo, with the specific aim of eliciting verbatim recall of communicative events and the psychosocial consequences participants attributed to them. The complete study design, including the rationale for site selection, participant profile, data collection procedures, analytical approach, and ethical protocols, is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Study Design Summary

Component	Detail
Study design	Qualitative single-site case study anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003). This design enables deep contextual analysis of organizational communication as a site of power reproduction, consistent with CDA's epistemological commitment to understanding discourse within its social and institutional conditions.
Study site	One privately owned education service company in Indonesia, referred to as EduCo (pseudonym). EduCo employs more than 80 full-time staff across instructional, administrative, and managerial divisions, and has been in operation for more than ten years. The single-site design was selected to allow sustained, context-sensitive analysis of organizational communication norms, internal hierarchies, and institutional ideologies that would be obscured in multi-site comparisons.
Participants	Twenty (20) purposively selected participants: 14 current employees and 6 former employees who had resigned within the preceding 24 months. Participants represented diverse positional levels staff (n = 9), supervisors (n = 7), and middle managers (n = 4) and had a minimum tenure of one year. Inclusion of former employees was essential to access candid accounts of communicative experiences that current employees may be reluctant to disclose.
Data collection	Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews conducted face-to-face or via video call, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was structured around two focal areas: (1) recollection of specific verbal utterances from supervisors that participants found either supportive-sounding yet troubling, or emotionally disorienting; and (2) the psychosocial effects they experienced following such communicative events.
Interview guide	The guide comprised three thematic blocks. Block A (contextual mapping) explored the general communication climate within EduCo. Block B (linguistic elicitation) invited participants to recall, as precisely as possible, exact phrases or sentences spoken by supervisors with particular attention to language that sounded caring, understanding, or collegial but left them feeling invalidated, guilty, or confused. Block C (impact assessment) explored the emotional, relational, and professional consequences of those communicative experiences, including effects on self-perception, willingness to raise concerns, and overall well-being.
Analytical framework	Data were analyzed using Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model of CDA, which examines discourse at the level of text (linguistic features such as modality, pronouns, and presupposition), discursive practice (how texts are produced and consumed within institutional routines), and social practice (how discourse reproduces or contests broader social relations of power). Identified utterances were further coded against four benevolent gaslighting strategies trivializing, diverting, countering, and

Component	Detail
	blocking adapted from Evans (2010) and Kukreja and Pandey (2023). Thematic patterns were cross-verified through member-checking with three participants.
Trustworthiness	Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the study site, member-checking, and peer debriefing. Transferability is supported by thick description of the site context. Dependability is ensured through an audit trail of all analytical decisions. Reflexivity was addressed through the first author's systematic bracketing of professional experience in organizational consulting, documented in a reflective journal maintained throughout the study process.
Ethical considerations	All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained through full anonymization of participant identities, positional roles, and organizational data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study protocol adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Indonesian National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki with respect to study involving human participants.

As detailed in Table 1, the single-site design of this study was a deliberate methodological choice rather than a convenience constraint. CDA operates on the premise that discourse is irreducibly contextual, that the meaning and social function of a given utterance cannot be fully understood apart from the institutional setting, cultural norms, and power hierarchies within which it is produced and received (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2008). A single organization provides a bounded, coherent context in which to analyze the ideological assumptions of management communication, the cultural scripts available to employees, and the material conditions shaping compliance or resistance with the necessary depth and specificity. The decision to include both current employees and recent resignees was theoretically motivated: gaslighting, by its very nature, suppresses the target's capacity to articulate and validate their experience (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023; Omran & Yousafzai, 2024). Participants who had already exited the organization were therefore expected, and in practice found, to provide more linguistically specific and emotionally candid accounts of the communicative events they had encountered. The interview guide's emphasis on verbatim recall of specific utterances, rather than general impressions of workplace climate, was equally deliberate: it generates data that can be subjected to rigorous linguistic analysis, rather than relying solely on participants' retrospective psychological attributions. Analytical categories were held open at the outset and refined iteratively through repeated engagement with the data, consistent with the abductive logic characteristic of qualitative CDA research (Wodak & Meyer, 2022). One methodological tension requires explicit acknowledgement, since the study combines retrospective interview data with claims about linguistic detail. What participants supplied were recalled utterances, not recordings of the original speech events, and recall is selective and reconstructive. Three considerations govern how far the linguistic claims can be pressed. First, the analytic object here is the utterance as participants remember and reproduce it, which is itself a legitimate object for discourse analysis because what an

employee carries away from an exchange is what shapes their subsequent conduct. Second, the interview guide asked for specific wording rather than general impressions, and the recurrence of near-identical formulations across participants who did not know one another lends weight to the claim that these are formulaic features of the organization's register rather than individual reconstructions. Third, and accordingly, the analysis is advanced at the level of recurrent discursive patterns rather than at the level of fine-grained features such as exact intonation, hesitation or repair, which recalled speech cannot support. Claims in the sections that follow should be read within that boundary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Paternalistic Discourse Patterns in EduCo's Organizational Communication

The most pervasive finding to emerge from the interview data was the systematic deployment of paternalistic discourse as the governing communicative register of supervisory interactions at EduCo. Across all twenty participants, accounts consistently described a communicative environment in which supervisory authority was exercised through the idiom of parental care rather than formal institutional command. Linguistic analysis of verbatim utterances recalled by participants revealed three dominant textual features, consistent with the patterns identified by Fairclough (2003) as characteristic of ideologically saturated institutional discourse.

First, supervisors made extensive use of the inclusive first-person plural pronoun 'kita' (we/us) in utterances that were functionally directive or dismissive. The pronoun created a discursive fiction of shared burden and common purpose, obscuring the asymmetry between the party issuing the instruction and the party obligated to comply. As one participant described, supervisors would say things like 'we are all in this together' precisely when assigning additional, unpaid work, making it socially impossible to refuse without appearing to reject collective solidarity. This use of inclusive pronouns as a coercive device aligns with van Dijk's (2008) analysis of 'we-discourse' as a strategy through which those in positions of power invoke community to naturalize unequal obligations.

Second, participants reported frequent use of modal constructions framing obligation as privilege expressions such as 'this is proof that you are trusted,' 'we are giving you this opportunity,' and 'not everyone gets a chance like this.' These constructions transformed what were in practice additional workloads or boundary violations into evidence of the employee's special status within the organizational family. Whittle, Vaara, and Maitlis (2023) demonstrate this mechanism precisely in their integrative framework of language and organizational sensemaking: language does not merely describe organizational reality. Still, it actively constitutes the employee's understanding of their own position, worth, and obligations within it.

Third, and most consequential for the argument of this paper, supervisory discourse at EduCo was consistently structured around what this study terms ideological framing through educational mission. Utterances repeatedly invoked the organization's identity as an agent of national education: 'We are here to make a difference for students,' 'Think about the children we are serving' as a moral lever to suppress employee dissatisfaction. This discursive move is particularly insidious in the education service context: by subordinating individual well-being to a transcendent social mission, supervisors effectively rendered personal grievance morally

illegitimate. This finding resonates with Cederström and Spicer's (2015) analysis of the wellness syndrome in corporate discourse, wherein the language of purpose and meaning is deployed to extract additional compliance from workers while concealing the material conditions of their exploitation.

Benevolent Gaslighting Strategies: Linguistic Patterns and Illustrative Utterances

Building on the paternalistic foundation described in Section 3.1, this section examines how benevolent gaslighting was operationalized through four strategies in EduCo's supervisory communication. Consistent with the two-dimensional structure of workplace gaslighting identified by Kukreja and Pandey (2023), trivialization and affliction, and extended here into a four-strategy typology following the typology adopted in the Method, from Evans (2010) and Kukreja and Pandey (2023), and consistent with the construct review by Popat and Pandey (2026), all four strategies were evidenced in the participant data. Table 2 presents representative utterances, translated from Indonesian, alongside the dominant CDA textual feature identified in each.

Table 2. Representative utterances by the benevolent gaslighting strategy and the dominant CDA textual feature

Strategy	Representative utterance (translated)	Dominant CDA feature
Trivializing	<i>"Saya tahu kamu capek, tapi kita semua capek di sini. Kamu bukan sendiri. Justru ini bukti kamu dipercaya."</i> ("I know you are tired, but we are all tired here. You are not alone. In fact, this is proof that you are trusted.")	Inclusive pronoun 'we' to normalize individual harm; reframing exhaustion as privilege; modal 'proof' as presupposition of trust.
Diverting	<i>"Kalau kamu fokus ke masalah seperti ini, nanti kita tidak bisa maju. Ayo kita bicara tentang program ke depan."</i> ("If you focus on problems like this, we will not be able to move forward. Let us talk about the upcoming programme instead.")	Topic redirection via conditional clause; collective 'we' to subsume dissent; forward-oriented imperative to foreclose grievance.
Countering	<i>"Saya rasa kamu salah tangkap. Maksud saya bukan begitu, dan saya sudah sampaikan ini dengan cara terbaik yang saya bisa."</i> ("I think you misunderstood. That was not my meaning, and I have communicated this in the best possible way I could.")	Attribution of error to the listener; self-praise modal 'best possible way'; presupposition of good faith as undeniable.
Blocking	<i>"Kita tidak perlu bawa ini ke HR. Kita keluarga di sini. Sampaikan ke saya langsung kalau ada apa-apa."</i> ("We do not	Institutional access restriction via relational metaphor 'family'; imperative as instruction to self-police;

Strategy	Representative utterance (translated)	Dominant CDA feature
	need to take this to HR. We are family here. Come to me directly if there is anything.")	exclusive channel consolidates power.

As Table 2 demonstrates, each of the four strategies operated through a distinctive linguistic mechanism that made it both caring in the surface register and coercive in its functional effect. The trivializing strategy, documented most frequently across the participant data (reported by 17 of 20 participants), reframed individual suffering as collective normalcy. The diverting strategy redirected communicative energy away from the substance of the grievance toward a future-oriented institutional agenda, thereby foreclosing the possibility of redress without explicitly denying the grievance itself. The countering strategy attributed perceptual error to the employee, weaponizing the listener's interpretive goodwill against them. The blocking strategy is the most institutionally consequential, restricting employees' access to formal grievance channels under the guise of relational warmth, consolidating all complaint-handling power within the supervisor-subordinate dyad.

What distinguishes the utterances in Table 2 from overtly hostile managerial communication is precisely the absence of aggression at the surface level. Each statement, read in isolation, could be interpreted as caring, encouraging, or reasonable. It is only when they are analyzed at the level of discursive practice, how they function within the pattern of organizational interaction, and at the level of social practice, what structural effects they produce, that their gaslighting function becomes legible. This is consistent with Prasad and Maraj's (2022) concept of the benevolent gaslight as a form of epistemic violence that operates precisely through the register of virtue, making it more difficult for targets to recognize, name, and resist than conventional hostile gaslighting.

It is further notable that the blocking strategy, the use of the 'family' metaphor to deter access to formal HR mechanisms, was particularly prevalent within EduCo's education service context. Catalano et al. (2024) describe a related phenomenon as 'administrative gaslighting,' wherein organizations propagate false relational narratives to insulate institutional authority from employee challenge. In EduCo, the family metaphor served an analogous function: it cast formal grievance procedures as a betrayal of relational trust, ensuring that communicative power remained concentrated in the hands of those who had already demonstrated willingness to deploy it manipulatively.

The Interaction of Paternalistic Discourse and Benevolent Gaslighting: A Mutually Constitutive Relationship

A central theoretical contribution of this study is the demonstration that paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting do not operate as separate phenomena but as mutually constitutive elements of a single discursive system. The analysis of participant accounts reveals a consistent dynamic: paternalistic discourse establishes the conditions of legitimacy within which benevolent gaslighting becomes effective. In contrast, benevolent gaslighting operationalizes the power asymmetries that paternalistic discourse naturalizes. Neither strategy is sufficient on its own; together they constitute a self-reinforcing communicative loop.

Specifically, the paternalistic framing of the supervisor as a wise and caring authority figure, constructed through the linguistic mechanisms described in Section 3.1, creates what this study terms a discursive precondition for deference. Once employees have internalized the expectation that supervisory communication is motivated by genuine care and organizational wisdom, they become less able to recognize the manipulative function of utterances that maintain the surface form of care while performing an invalidating function. As Participant 11 (supervisor-level, four years tenure) described: 'I believed my manager genuinely cared. So when she said I was misunderstanding things, I trusted her interpretation over my own. It took me a long time to realize that my interpretation was consistently the one that was inconvenient for her.'

This dynamic maps directly onto Sweet's (2019) sociological account of gaslighting as a practice enabled by structural inequalities: it is not simply the individual utterance that gaslights, but the entire social and institutional context that makes certain voices credible and others suspect. In EduCo, that context was constructed and continuously reproduced through paternalistic discourse through the daily accumulation of utterances that positioned the supervisor as the legitimate arbiter of organizational reality. By the time benevolent gaslighting was deployed, the conditions for its effectiveness had already been thoroughly prepared.

The Indonesian cultural context amplified this dynamic in ways consistent with findings by Yusmen et al. (2024) and Pratiwi et al. (2023). The cultural values of *ewuh pakewuh* and high-power distance, well-documented features of Javanese organizational culture, meant that employees experienced not only cognitive difficulty in naming their experience, but social and moral difficulty in doing so. To question a superior's benevolent framing risked being perceived as ungrateful, insubordinate, or disruptive to organizational harmony. This cultural layer rendered the discursive precondition of deference not merely organizational but deeply personal, woven into the employees' own understanding of what it means to be a good professional and a respectful colleague.

Psychosocial Effects on Employee Well-Being: From Self-Doubt to Silent Resignation

The second research question asked what psychosocial effects employees reported as consequences of the communicative practices described above. The interview data yielded six distinct impact categories, presented in Table 3 with illustrative participant accounts. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on workplace gaslighting and organizational well-being.

Table 3. Psychosocial impact categories and illustrative participant accounts

Impact category	Illustrative participant account (paraphrased and anonymized)
Chronic self-doubt	"After a while I started to believe that maybe I really was too sensitive. I would replay conversations at night wondering what I had done wrong." (Participant 7, staff, 3 years tenure)
Moral disorientation	"I felt guilty for being upset. The way he said it made it sound like complaining was selfish when everyone else was struggling too." (Participant 12, supervisor, 4 years tenure)

Impact category	Illustrative participant account (paraphrased and anonymized)
Communicative withdrawal	"I stopped raising issues. There was no point. It would just come back to me looking like the problem." (Participant 3, staff, 2 years tenure)
Silent resignation	"I was still physically there but I had completely checked out. I did only what was written in my contract and nothing more." (Participant 19, former employee, resigned after 3 years)
Psychosomatic effects	"I had headaches every Sunday evening before work. I did not connect it to the workplace until after I resigned and they stopped." (Participant 6, former employee, resigned after 2.5 years)
Difficulty re-trusting leadership	"Even in my next job I kept waiting for the same thing to happen. I would overthink every message from my manager." (Participant 15, former employee, resigned after 4 years)

The most consistently reported effect of chronic self-doubt was described by all 20 participants to varying degrees. This finding directly corroborates the scale validation work of Kukreja and Pandey (2023), which identified self-doubt induction as the core mechanism through which workplace gaslighting causes harm, and extends it by demonstrating the specific linguistic pathways through which self-doubt is produced. In EduCo, self-doubt appeared less as an incidental by-product of poor communication than as a recurrent outcome of a communicative pattern that had the effect of keeping employees dependent on supervisory interpretation of their own experience. The data support a claim about effect, not about design or intent: retrospective accounts from one site cannot establish whether the pattern was deliberately constructed, and no such claim is made here.

The phenomenon of moral disorientation deserves particular attention in the education service context. Multiple participants described feeling guilty when dissatisfied with their working conditions, reasoning that their discomfort was a personal moral failing given the organization's educational mission. This guilt was not self-generated but was actively cultivated through supervisory language that invoked student welfare as a counterweight to employee well-being. This constitutes what Catalano et al. (2024) term 'institutional gaslighting through mission discourse,' the use of an organization's stated purpose to delegitimize the legitimate concerns of those who sustain it. The SDG 4.7 dimension of this finding is significant: an organization that claims to advance equitable education while deploying language that systematically undermines the psychological safety of its own employees embodies a profound internal contradiction that warrants policy-level attention.

Communicative withdrawal and silent resignation reported by 16 and 14 participants, respectively, represent the organizational-level manifestation of the individual well-being effects described above. These findings are consistent with the growing literature on quiet quitting in Indonesian workplaces. Reading silent resignation through the quiet-quitting literature requires a brief justification, since the two terms arise in different traditions. What participants described was not formal exit but a deliberate narrowing of effort to the contractually required minimum, accompanied by withdrawal from discretionary communication; that is the behavioural definition quiet quitting carries in the organizational literature, which is why it is the appropriate comparison. Research on quiet quitting in toxic Indonesian work environments identifies (Kurniawan et al., 2026) emotional exhaustion as the primary mediating pathway between workplace toxicity and withdrawal behavior, a

pathway also reported for abusive supervision in the hospitality sector (Xu & Lü, 2023) and associated with reduced organizational performance in Indonesian banking (Sitorus & Rachmawati, 2024). The present study extends this finding by specifying the linguistic mechanism of benevolent gaslighting, operating through a paternalistic discursive framework that produces emotional exhaustion. On the interpretation advanced here, employees did not simply disengage from a toxic environment; their accounts suggest that the language of the workplace had made active engagement feel psychologically unsafe. This is an interpretation arising from participants' accounts rather than a demonstrated causal sequence.

The psychosomatic effects and persistent difficulties re-trusting leadership reported by former employees after resignation point to the lasting impact of sustained exposure to benevolent gaslighting. Moisoglou et al. (2025b) demonstrated significant associations between workplace gaslighting and employees' mental health and work life in a large-sample cross-sectional study, while Moisoglou et al. (2025a) documented its links to quiet quitting and reduced work engagement and showed that resilience buffers them. The present study corroborates these quantitative findings with qualitative linguistic data that traces the specific communicative events from which these outcomes originate, a contribution that psychometric measurement alone cannot provide. Critically, several former EduCo employees described experiencing hypervigilance toward supervisory communication in subsequent employment, suggesting that the damage extends beyond organizational boundaries into the employee's long-term professional identity and relational capacity.

Taken together, the findings presented in Sections 3.1 through 3.4 demonstrate that paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting constitute a coherent and self-sustaining system of communicative control that is particularly effective and particularly harmful in the specific sociolinguistic conditions of Indonesian education service organizations. The combination of high-power distance, collectivist cultural norms, ideological organizational mission, and institutional restriction of formal grievance mechanisms creates what this study proposes, as an interpretive model rather than an established universal phenomenon, as a quadrilateral discursive trap: employees are constrained from above (by hierarchical authority), from below (by cultural norms of deference), from without (by the organization's moral mission narrative), and from within (by the internalized self-doubt that sustained gaslighting produces). In this context, the language of care is not merely the vehicle for manipulation; it is its most essential instrument.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting operate as mutually constitutive communicative strategies in an Indonesian education service company, and to document the psychosocial consequences experienced by employees subjected to these practices. Through Critical Discourse Analysis of verbatim utterances recalled by twenty participants across four benevolent gaslighting strategies trivializing, diverting, countering, and blocking and through close attention to the three-dimensional relationship between text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2003), this study has demonstrated that paternalistic discourse does not merely accompany gaslighting but actively enables it. This study interprets paternalistic discourse as not merely accompanying gaslighting but as establishing the conditions in which it operates, a relationship the design

demonstrates interpretively rather than causally, constructing a discursive precondition of deference within which apparently caring language functions to invalidate employees' perceptions, restrict their access to institutional redress, and consolidate supervisory power. The resulting configuration described in this paper as a quadrilateral discursive trap constrains employees simultaneously through hierarchical authority, cultural norms of deference, organizational mission ideology, and internalized self-doubt, producing a range of psychosocial effects that include chronic self-doubt, moral disorientation, communicative withdrawal, silent resignation, and persistent difficulty re-trusting leadership well beyond the boundaries of the organization itself. Before those implications are set out, each research question is answered directly. On the first, the linguistic strategies that constitute paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting at EduCo were the inclusive pronoun *kita* used where responsibility was in fact unilateral, modal constructions that framed obligation as privilege, the family metaphor deployed to deter recourse to formal channels, and four gaslighting moves, trivializing, diverting, countering and blocking, each realised through a distinct textual mechanism. On the second, the psychosocial effects participants reported were chronic self-doubt, moral disorientation, communicative withdrawal, silent resignation, psychosomatic symptoms, and persistent difficulty re-trusting leadership after leaving. These findings carry three significant implications.

The theoretical contribution can be stated precisely. To the workplace gaslighting literature, which has been built largely on psychometric instruments, the study adds a linguistic specification of the mechanism: it identifies the textual features through which invalidation is accomplished, which measurement alone cannot recover (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). To critical discourse analysis, which in Indonesia has concentrated on political and media texts, it extends the method to internal organizational communication. To organizational communication scholarship, it argues that paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting are better treated as one analytic unit than as two, because neither accounts for the observed pattern alone. The framework was developed in one Indonesian organization and is offered for testing in other Global South contexts, which existing Western-centred scholarship underserves (Omran & Yousafzai, 2024); it is not claimed to have been validated across them. Practically, the findings provide actionable evidence for human resource practitioners and organizational leaders: the language of care, when deployed within structurally asymmetrical relationships and without institutional accountability mechanisms, constitutes a form of psychosocial harm that organizations have both a professional and ethical responsibility to address beginning with communication audits, manager training in non-manipulative supervisory discourse, and the restoration of accessible, independent grievance channels that are not gatekept by the very supervisors whose communication is under scrutiny. These three measures follow from the evidence in different degrees, and the distinction should be kept. Independent grievance channels follow most directly, since blocking operated precisely by routing complaints through the supervisor concerned. Communication audits and manager training are reasonable extensions of the findings rather than measures this study tested, and no claim is made here about their effectiveness.

In terms of policy relevance, the study contributes directly to the goals of SDG 8, Target 8.8 the protection of labour rights and the promotion of safe and secure working environments by specifying a form of workplace harm that is invisible to conventional

occupational health frameworks yet profoundly corrosive to the well-being, dignity, and professional autonomy of those who experience it; and to SDG 4.7 by drawing attention to the institutional contradiction embedded in organizations that position themselves as agents of equitable education while systematically undermining the communicative rights of their own employees. The limitations of this study are its single-site design, its reliance on retrospective participant recall rather than recorded speech, and the interpretive rather than causal status of the relationships proposed; together these constrain generalizability, and the findings should be read as an account of one organization rather than of Indonesian education service companies in general. Future research is encouraged to extend this analytical framework to multi-site comparative studies, to examine the role of digital communication channels in amplifying gaslighting dynamics, and to investigate whether and how employees in Indonesian organizational contexts develop linguistic resistance strategies in response to the communicative conditions documented here.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial, financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest. The authors further affirm that the research findings, interpretations, and conclusions were developed independently and were not influenced by any external parties.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Septien Dwi Savandha contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, and writing of the original manuscript. Adelia Azzahra contributed to data collection, data curation, literature review, validation, and writing through review and editing. Both authors critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

GENERATIVE AI STATEMENT

The authors acknowledge the limited use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools during the preparation of this manuscript, specifically to improve language clarity, grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and academic readability. The use of generative AI was restricted to editorial and linguistic assistance and did not replace the authors' intellectual contributions to the research. All research activities, including the development of the theoretical framework, qualitative data collection, application of Critical Discourse Analysis, identification of paternalistic discourse and benevolent gaslighting strategies, interpretation of participants' experiences, and formulation of conclusions, were conducted and critically evaluated by the authors. The authors affirm that generative AI was not used to fabricate

research data, generate participant responses, or manipulate findings. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed and verified to ensure scientific accuracy, ethical compliance, originality, and consistency with the study's objectives. The authors assume full responsibility for the integrity, reliability, and final content of the published manuscript.

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