

Distortion Archetypes in Gendered Power Dynamics: Emotional Baiting, Proximity, and Relational Deflection: A Procedural Framework for Analyzing Symbolic Displacement in Male-Female Interactions

Keisha C. D. Covington

Center for Development and Civic Engagement (Veterans Affairs), USA

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the hidden mechanisms of distortion archetypes in gendered power dynamics, focusing on the role emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement function as strategic tools of symbolic displacement, a process that refers to the erosion of an individual's agency or presence through communicative, sometimes relational cues that conceal their value. Drawing on symbolic interactionism and communication theory, the exploration introduces a procedural method for decoding "theater," a performative mode of interaction that obscures intent and manipulates emotional labor. It proposes a decoding method that can be applied to recognize and resist covert manipulations embedded in everyday gender exchanges. To address limitations in conventional psychological models that lack mechanisms for decoding symbolic displacement and relational manipulation, the study introduces Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) and its ACIR model, which operationalize the decoding process by providing analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes for interpreting relational distortions. Integrating insights from psychology, behavioral economics, and communication studies, the model offers a practical approach for identifying manipulative modalities in male-female dynamics. Together, these frameworks clarify the relational processes that shape symbolic displacement and strengthen individual agency within gendered power asymmetries.

1. Introduction

In contemporary gender interactions, potent and sometimes covert relational tactics have the potential to mask intent, destabilize agency, and limit legacy building. This study investigates how emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection function as strategic tools of symbolic displacement that reinforce asymmetrical power dynamics. Emotional baiting refers to symbolic cues that provoke emotional responses to stimulate labor that conceal inequity, while relational deflection redirects recognition or responsibility through role misalignment and hierarchical reinforcement. Rather than tracing historical origins, the study focuses on operational impact, drawing from economics, psychology, STEM discourse, and institutional

* Corresponding author's E-mail address: kcovington@fidelityconsortium.org

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critique to reveal how these patterns sustain gendered inequities across public and private domains.

The study draws on symbolic interactionism which examines how individuals construct meaning through social symbols, roles, and interactions (Blumer, 1989; Goffman, 1959). Gender roles are socially constructed through symbolic interaction, where individuals internalize meanings attached to behaviors and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). The symbolic interactionist view emphasizes that gender is not biologically fixed but emerges through ongoing socialization and role performance (Becker et al., 2021).

Within this lens, distortion archetypes are not merely behavioral anomalies but symbolic performances that destabilize agency and disrupt intent. In this context, emotional baiting can be interpreted as a symbolic cue that invites a reactive identity performance reinforcing distortion. Complementing this, communication theory (CT) provides a scaffold for understanding how messages are encoded, transmitted, and decoded within relational contexts (Craig, 1999; Hall, 1980). The study applies interactional models and message distortion frameworks to examine how symbolic displacement emerges through behaviors that burden women with affective responsibilities.

This exploration centers on the operational impact of distortion archetypes within gendered exchanges, yet it is useful to acknowledge broader scholarly perspectives that shape how individuals interpret emotional and relational cues. Although not employed in this study, appraisal theory considers how individuals assess the significance of emotional cues (Lazarus, 1991; Moors et al., 2013). A related base in Christianson (2014) shows how sensemaking examines the ways people organize and interpret ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). A third view, dialogic communication, emphasizes how meaning emerges through relational exchange and interactional responsiveness (Baxter, 2011; Kent & Taylor, 2002). These perspectives provide conceptual context but differ from the present focus, as they describe interpretive processes rather than offering a structured approach for identifying manipulative cues or examining how emotional labor can spiral into displacement. Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) and its ACIR model, anchored in analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes, provide the structure for examining how “theater” operates within gendered exchanges. Theater performance obscures intent and manipulates perception, making it difficult to challenge or name distortion. CVT and ACIR offer tools to analyze and resist these symbolic manipulations, empowering individuals to reclaim agency.

1.1. Operational Definitions and Decision Rules

Symbolic displacement refers to relational processes in which women’s agency is redirected or removed through communicative cues, emotional demands, or role-based expectations. It is coded when a woman’s role is reframed to reduce visible agency, when distortion archetypes such as emotional baiting or relational deflection accompany shifts in narrative framing, and when the interaction leaves her more burdened with emotional labor.

Emotional baiting refers to symbolic cues or relational prompts that elicit disproportionate emotional responses and stimulate emotional labor that conceals inequity. Emotional baiting is identified through emotional escalation that redirects agency, shifts attention toward managing affect, and intensifies emotional labor that conceals underlying power asymmetry.

Proximity denotes the use of physical, emotional, or communicative closeness to create a sense of safety or solidarity that obscures manipulation or hierarchical reinforcement. It is identified

when closeness intensifies during evaluative or conflictual moments, when relational appeals redirect autonomy, and when supportive cues accompany diminished agency.

Relational deflection refers to the redirection of recognition or agency away from women through role misalignment, symbolic reframing, or reinforcement that minimizes authority. It is coded when a woman's role or intent is reframed in ways that reduce visible agency, when distortion archetypes occur alongside shifts in narrative framing, and when the interaction leaves her less recognized or more burdened with emotional labor.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women's Economic Contributions

Women's economic contributions remain substantial yet systematically undervalued across global contexts. The World Bank (2023) identifies women's labor force participation as a key driver of GDP growth, yet persistent wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership, and limited access to capital and credit continue to constrain their advancement. Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2024) reports that only 4% of bilateral aid is allocated to gender equality, despite women's central role in economic development. These disparities are not solely structural but are symbolically reinforced through distortion archetypes that obscure women's agency.

Power Basis Theory (PBT) explains how cultural systems shape access to power by assigning symbolic roles that limit women's economic visibility (Lee et al., 2011). Within these dynamics, emotional baiting functions as a tactic that redirects recognition through emotional labor. Emotional labor itself has long been understood as structured rather than incidental; Hochschild (1983) conceptualized it as a form of labor tied to social and economic expectations, while Shields et al. (2018) highlights how gendered beliefs normalize these demands. Lively's (2013) research highlighted gendered beliefs that normalize these demands. Relationship dynamics further reinforce inequity, as subjective perceptions of power often outweigh formal authority in shaping outcomes (Korner & Schutz, 2021).

Earlier work also shows how embodied cues reinforce hierarchy, with nonreciprocal touch functioning as a status reminder in male–female interactions. Relational deflection operates alongside these mechanisms by redirecting attention away from women's contributions, particularly in intimate and reproductive contexts. Maroda (2004) suggests that women's prosocial expressions of power are often misrecognized, while performative interaction, or “theater,” intensifies emotional labor in ways that mask structural inequities. In leadership settings, women's prosocial emotional labor benefits organizations but undermines their own power retention (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). Symbolic interactionism further illustrates how role performance contributes to the erasure of women's labor, particularly in domestic and informal economies (Garcia Alcaraz & Flores Palacios, 2021), with micro-level exchanges reinforcing gendered expectations (Spencer & Drass, 1989).

Despite measurable gains, women remain unpaid in formal labor markets, with continued gaps in gender equality disclosures (United Nations Sustainable Stock Exchanges Initiative [UN SSE], 2025). Global estimates suggest that closing the gender gap could significantly expand economic output, yet systemic undervaluation persists (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN Women], 2025). Together, these findings indicate that symbolic displacement in male–female interactions operate across interpersonal, economic, emotional, and cultural systems.

2.2. Misogyny in Institutional and Relational Domains

Misogyny operates systemically across institutional and relational domains, shaping gendered power dynamics through symbolic and structural mechanisms. In academia, law, and healthcare, institutionalized misogyny manifests through microaggressions and gendered norms that undermine women's authority and visibility (Becker et al., 2021; Schoenbaum, 2024). These interactional patterns reflect broader status dynamics, where gender operates as a system maintained through everyday exchanges in which expectations are reinforced (Ridgeway, 2011). Within these settings, gendered expectations operate as affective practices that reproduce hierarchy through subtle forms of symbolic and social policing (McCarthy & Taylor, 2023), aligning with PBT, which explains how symbolic roles restrict women's access to legitimate standing (Lee et al., 2011).

Emotional baiting reinforces these patterns by compelling women into emotional labor that substitutes for recognition and autonomy (Shields et al., 2018). Additional mechanisms, including gaslighting and misogyny, further sustain suppression by undermining women's emotional credibility (Evtseva, 2024), while proximity can complicate these dynamics, as closeness is often interpreted as safety even when it obscures control or manipulation (Bartholini, 2020). Relational deflection operates alongside these processes within caregiving and reproductive roles (Decker et al., 2021). Together, these dynamics are sustained through performative interaction that demands emotional labor while concealing structural inequities (Barry et al., 2018). Emotional labor intersects with diversity and inclusion efforts, making it a critical lens for analyzing modern misogyny (Gabriel et al., 2023).

Through symbolic interactionism, emotional baiting, gaslighting, and role-based expectations emerge as micro-level mechanisms that reinforce systemic misogyny (March et al., 2023). Misogyny is communicative, embedded in language that encodes dominance as protection, shaping relational norms and institutional practices. Communication theory shows how relational messages carry implicit power dynamics, often appearing in discourse that frames women as needing guidance (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Gaslighting relies on strategic misdirection and silence, which function as forms of message distortion (March et al., 2023). These patterns are sustained through interactional norms that privilege male hierarchy even in the absence of overt discrimination.

2.3. Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) as both Battleground and Bridge

Women's participation in STEM remains both a battleground for gender equity and a bridge to economic empowerment. UNESCO (2023) reports that women comprise 35% of global STEM graduates, a figure that has remained relatively stagnant despite their contributions to innovation, while the National Science Foundation (2023) notes that women represent 34% of the U.S. STEM workforce but remain underrepresented in leadership and technical roles. These disparities are structural and reinforced through distortion archetypes that undermine women's agency, with feminist critiques emphasizing how masculine epistemologies frame their contributions as peripheral. Within STEM environments, emotional baiting emerges through expectations of emotional labor, particularly in teaching and mentoring roles, where engagement is substituted for recognition (Wang and Yin, 2025).

Emotionally intelligent pedagogical approaches have been proposed to counterbalance these expectations and reframe how engagement and recognition operate within learning environments (Bustamante-Mora et al., 2025). Relational deflection complicates this dynamic by reframing women's contributions as support rather than leadership, with interventions reinforcing binary expectations (Namiro et al., 2024). Pedagogical structures contribute to

these patterns, as lecture-based STEM environments are associated with lower levels of self-determined motivation among women, limiting recognition of their input (Stolk et al., 2021). These dynamics extend into early professional environments, where performative interaction, or “theater” becomes a strategy for navigating legitimacy. Emotional labor is performed to secure recognition, even as it remains undervalued within STEM roles (Smith, 2023). This occurs alongside broader structural disparities: UNESCO (2023) reports that women represent only 22% of AI professionals, while just 2% of venture capital supports female-led tech startups. Despite increased participation, women hold less than 20% of STEM leadership roles, underscoring persistent patterns of symbolic displacement. Together, these patterns reflect interactional and communicative processes. Symbolic interactionism explains how gendered role performance and micro-level exchanges reinforce exclusionary norms, shaping mentorship and recognition, while communication theory clarifies how institutional messaging reproduces dominant ideologies and encodes masculine norms as the default (Garr-Schultz et al., 2023).

Craig’s (1999) socio-cultural tradition shows how these messages sustain exclusionary cultures, and Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model illustrates how women adapt to these signals through forms of emotional labor that conceal inequity. These dynamics are amplified in digital environments, where mediated communication relies on subtle cues that shape perceptions of competence and intent, reinforcing hierarchies in less visible ways (Cheshin et al., 2025). As a result, communicative patterns contribute to symbolic displacement by reframing women’s technical contributions as supportive, limiting recognition in innovation and leadership narratives.

2.4. Interdisciplinary Theoretical Ground: Symbolic Interactionism, Communication Theory and Cognitive Versatility Theory

Symbolic interactionism offers a foundational lens for understanding how gendered roles and power asymmetries are constructed through microlevel interactions and shared meanings. It is essential for decoding distortion archetypes such as emotional baiting and relational deflection, as gender emerges through ongoing socialization and role performance. This view aligns with Butler’s (1990) concept of gender as performative, where repeated behaviors stabilize expectations over time. In this sense, distortion archetypes can be understood as repeated performances that sustain asymmetrical dynamics. As Brasil (2024) notes, symbolic interactionism has interdisciplinary utility in qualitative research, particularly in decoding how meaning is socially constructed and performed in gendered exchanges.

Power Basis Theory conceptualizes power as multidimensional, social, and emotional, showing how symbolic roles distort access to these domains and positioning symbolic displacement as both a communicative and systemic phenomenon requiring adaptive decoding strategies. CVT extends this framework by emphasizing cognitive adaptability across analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes. Together, symbolic interactionism, PBT, and CVT form an interdisciplinary scaffold for decoding symbolic manipulation in gendered exchanges. Recent literature reinforces these insights. Valli (2020) explores emotional displacement as symbolic violence in urban and migratory contexts, while Cohen (2023) identifies cultural idioms of distress shaped by systemic inequities. These examples underscore the relevance of cognitive approaches like CVT for decoding symbolic displacement in real time across digital and intercultural settings.

Communication theory extends symbolic interactionism by offering interpretive tools to decode displacement embedded in emotional baiting. While symbolic interactionism frames emotional baiting as a ritualized act that manipulates perception and identity, CT clarifies how symbolic cues are encoded and decoded in relational exchanges. Encoding and decoding

models explain how dominant meanings are embedded in messages and interpreted based on social positioning. This is relevant for analyzing symbolic displacement through nonverbal cues, strategic silence, and emotional misdirection that exploit emotional labor and compel affective performances that mask power asymmetries (Shields et al., 2018; March et al., 2023). Socio cultural traditions show how communication reproduces social hierarchies through symbolic messaging, including organizational and media discourse that frames women's contributions as supportive rather than authoritative. Digital communication research illustrates how symbolic displacement is sustained through mediated interactions that regulate emotional labor and shape how individuals position themselves within relational exchanges.

The performative nature of theater in gendered interactions reflects a strategic encoding of dominance that is decoded variably across contexts, underscoring the need for a cognitive framework capable of real time engagement. CVT and its ACIR model address this gap by introducing adaptive cognitive modes that support multidimensional decoding of symbolic displacement. While symbolic interactionism and communication theory provide interpretive scaffolding, CVT and ACIR extend this work by offering a model for cognitive engagement with emotional distortion in practice.

Emotional baiting, viewed through symbolic interactionism, becomes a symbolic performance that masks intent and destabilizes agency. Ozunal's (2025) findings demonstrate how artistic expression can function as emotional resistance and symbolic reclamation, aligning with adaptive cognitive responses. Communication processes sustain these performances across contexts. For example, Wang et al. (2025) show that emotional labor is regulated through communicative norms that disadvantage women. Together, these perspectives position communication theory as the primary interpretive lens, with CVT and ACIR serving as a complementary framework for real time decoding and response.

2.4.1 Cognitive Versatility Theory and the ACIR Model in Context

Several established approaches offer partial insight into how people interpret emotion, ambiguity, and relational cues. Appraisal theory examines how individuals evaluate emotional significance, sensemaking explores how people organize and interpret ambiguity, and dialogic communication considers how meaning develops through interaction. These perspectives contribute interpretive context but do not provide a structured method for identifying manipulative cues or tracing how symbolic displacement unfolds in real time. CVT refers to the capacity to shift among analytical, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes to meet situational demands. Rather than serving as a singular solution, CVT and ACIR complement existing interpretive approaches by adding a cognitive structure for real time decoding of distortion archetypes.

Related scholarship identifies cultural idioms expressed through metaphor, silence, and embodied emotion; CVT's intuitive and reflective modes help interpret these cues without replacing broader theoretical perspectives. Organizational studies propose emotional labor frameworks, and behavioral economics introduces signaling theory, but these models do not integrate cognitive adaptability for real time decoding. CVT synthesizes these insights by embedding interpretive depth within a cognitive schema that equips individuals to identify distortion archetypes. Its companion model, ACIR, operationalizes this adaptability through four cognitive modes, enabling multidimensional decoding of symbolic displacement. Unlike traditional theories that offer lenses for analysis, ACIR provides an application model that bridges theoretical insight with actionable strategies for mitigating asymmetrical dynamics in real time and is illustrated below in Figure 1.

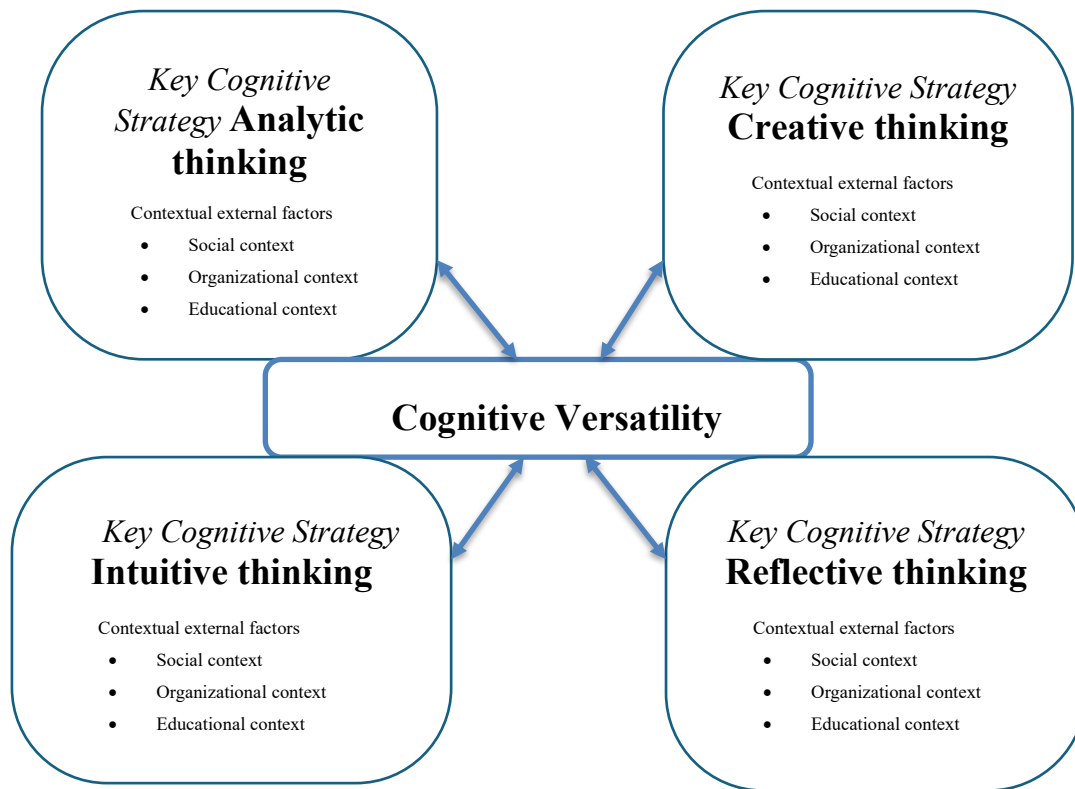


Figure 1. Cognitive Versatility Model

3. Research Problem

Distorted archetypes within gendered power dynamics manifest through symptoms such as emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement. These mechanisms function as symbolic strategies that obscure intent and manipulate emotional labor, yet little is known about how they operate as performative systems that destabilize agency and reinforce asymmetrical roles.

4. Research Questions

How do individuals interpret and cognitively respond to symbolic displacement tactics such as emotional baiting and relational deflection within gendered relational or institutional dynamics?

In what ways do proximity and displacement influence individuals' perceived agency and recognition of their contributions in gendered power structures?

5. Sample Population

Participants were eligible if they were at least 18 years old, had experience in professional, educational, or community settings, and could describe interactions involving emotional labor, relational misrecognition, or symbolic displacement. No personal identifiable information was collected, and participants were not required to disclose demographic details beyond regional location or self-identified role categories such as early career, mid career, secondary education student, retiree, disabled individual, ethnic minority, or male ally. The study engaged 17 participants, consistent with qualitative standards for exploratory research and reflecting the

point at which thematic saturation was reached. This sample size supported thematic depth and contextually grounded interpretation of symbolic displacement across diverse lived experiences. Participants spanned secondary education students to retirees and represented cultural, geographic (urban/rural, Global North/South), and socioeconomic diversity. The sample also included individuals from underrepresented sectors in STEM and leadership. Table 2 presents the descriptive participant table summarizing role categories, regional location, and contextual characteristics without collecting identifiable demographic information.

Table 1. Participant Descriptives

Participant roles	Count	Regional location	Relevant context
Secondary education students	4	Global North and Global South	STEM clubs, early leadership
Early career professionals	5	Global North and Global South	LGBTQ plus participants, institutional interactions
Mid career professionals	4	Global North and Global South	Managerial roles, proximity based expectations
Retirees	4	Global North and Global South	Community leadership, informal economies
Disabled participants	4	Global North and Global South	Strategic silence, performative inclusion
Ethnic minorities	6	Global North and Global South	Relational deflection, symbolic displacement
Male allies	2	Global North	Emotional regulation expectations
Total participants	17	Global North and Global South	No identifiable information collected

6. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory methodology grounded in narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim is to uncover how symbolic displacement manifested through emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection operates within gendered power dynamics. Qualitative methods are appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of lived experiences, particularly when investigating symbolic and emotional phenomena. It follows a narrative inquiry, which allows participants to reflect on personal experiences, that reveal how symbolic manipulation is interpreted, internalized, and resisted across relational and institutional contexts. The study is interpretive in nature, drawing from symbolic interactionism, communication theory, and CVT to analyze meaning-making processes and cognitive responses to distortion archetypes.

7. Methods Design

7.1. Methods

The study uses a semi-structured interview design with an open-ended format administered online, allowing participants to reflect candidly on their experiences of emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection. Interviews were conducted individually through online platforms ensuring consistency across all participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30-50 minutes and was documented with participant consent. The design prioritizes mental health, safety and emotional depth, creating space for participants to engage with the subject matter in a way that feels comfortable and genuine. Thematic saturation guided the final sample size, with an initial target of 15 to 20 participants. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach to identify patterns related to

symbolic displacement and cognitive response. Participants were recruited through community organizations, professional networks, STEM clubs, VA disability advocacy groups, and social media postings that invited individuals to share experiences related to symbolic displacement and emotional labor. Recruitment emphasized voluntary participation and did not involve institutional gatekeepers. Sampling also occurred when participants referred to peers who had relevant experiences.

7.2. Ethics Review

The study followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality protections, and secure data storage. Because no identifiable information was collected and the study posed minimal risk, it qualified for exempt status under community-based research guidelines. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Formal IRB review was not applicable due to the study's minimal-risk, non-clinical qualitative design conducted independently.

7.3. Coding and Analytic Procedure

Data was analyzed using a structured thematic analysis guided by the ACIR framework. Initial open coding identified recurring interactional patterns, followed by focused coding to classify these patterns into distortion archetypes emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement. Coding was conducted iteratively, with repeated review of transcripts to ensure consistency and conceptual clarity. To enhance analytic rigor, credibility was supported through reflexive memos and pattern comparison across cases rather than formal intercoder reliability. ACIR guided both coding and interpretation by structuring how patterns were identified, categorized across cognitive modes, and interpreted in relation to participants responses, functioning as an analytic framework rather than a post hoc classification mechanism.

Figure 2 presents the ACIR guided coding matrix. Because coding was conducted by a single researcher, rigor was strengthened through peer debriefing, triangulation, and analytic memoing. Peer debriefing involved consultation with qualitative researchers who reviewed code definitions, examined exemplar segments, and assessed thematic alignment across emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement. Triangulation was achieved by comparing ACIR mode interpretations with symbolic interactionism and communication theory to ensure analytic consistency and to test alternative explanations such as sensemaking, feminist interpretations, and extraneous role expectations. Analytic memos documented decision rules, reflexive considerations, and points of tension in the data, providing a transparent record of how codes were refined, how themes were consolidated, and how interpretive judgments were made in lieu of formal intercoder reliability. Table 2 presents the ACIR guided coding matrix.

ACIR guided coding beyond thematic labeling by structuring how each distortion archetype was interpreted across analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes. Analytic coding identified where roles, recognition, or emotional demands shifted; intuitive coding attended to felt misalignment or disproportionate affect; creative coding captured participants' attempts to reframe or respond; and reflective coding documented how they later named or resisted distortion. These modes were integrated into the codebook (see Table 3) and applied iteratively across transcripts to classify segments as emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, or displacement.

Table 2. ACIR guided coding matrix

Construct	Operational Definition	Decision Rule	Behavioral Indicators	ACIR Modes Used in Coding
<i>Symbolic Displacement</i>	Relational processes where women's agency or contributions are misrecognized, redirected, or removed through communicative cues, emotional demands, or role-based expectations.	Code symbolic displacement when reframing reduces visible agency, when distortion cues shape narrative shifts, and when recognition decreases or emotional burden increases.	Reframing leadership as support; repositioning initiative as reactive or secondary; shifting recognition to others.	Analytic: identify reframing; Intuitive: sense misrecognition; Creative: consider alternative documentation; Reflective: name displacement pattern.
<i>Emotional Baiting</i>	Symbolic cues or relational prompts that elicit disproportionate emotional responses, destabilizing agency or stimulating emotional labor that conceals inequity.	Code when a cue triggers heightened emotional response, the woman's focus moves from her original position to managing affect, and emotional labor obscures power asymmetry.	Sudden irritation, disappointment, affective shifts that redirect attention from contribution to emotional repair.	Analytic: track shift from task to affect; Intuitive: sense disproportionate emotion; Creative: reframe response; Reflective: interpret as baiting.
<i>Proximity</i>	Use of physical, emotional, or communicative closeness to create a sense of safety or solidarity that obscures manipulation or hierarchical reinforcement.	Code when closeness intensifies during evaluation, conflict, or decision-making, autonomy or dissent is redirected through relational appeals, and apparent support coincides with diminished recognition of agency.	Increased warmth, reassurance, or access coinciding with dissent; closeness that softens resistance.	Analytic: note timing of closeness; Intuitive: feel strategic intimacy; Creative: restate boundaries; Reflective: interpret proximity as control.
<i>Relational Deflection</i>	Redirection of recognition, authorship, or agency away from women through role misalignment, symbolic reframing, or hierarchical reinforcement that minimizes authority.	Code when substantive contributions are minimized or reframed as support, responsibility shifts toward relational roles rather than expertise, and recognition is granted for care or effort instead of leadership.	Leadership narrated as "helping"; expertise framed as support; credit shifted to others.	Analytic: detect misalignment between role and narrative; Intuitive: sense minimization; Creative: explore ways to assert authorship; Reflective: identify deflection pattern.

Table 3. Study-Specific Coding Table

Distortion Archetype	Behavioral Indicator (From Data)	ACIR Cognitive Mode Used in Coding
<u>Emotional Baiting</u>	Symbolic cue triggers disproportionate emotional labor	Intuitive detection of misalignment Analytic identification of redirected intent
<u>Proximity</u>	Closeness intensifies during evaluation or conflict	Reflective awareness of boundary erosion
<u>Relational Deflection</u>	Contribution reframed as support or assistance	Analytic identification of role misalignment Intuitive detection of credit redirection
<u>Symbolic Displacement</u>	Agency reduced through reframing or emotional demand	Analytic tracking recognition shifts Reflective interpretation of cumulative burden

8. Instrumentation

Instrumentation consists of a custom-developed interview protocol aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Questions are designed to elicit narratives on emotional manipulation, symbolic displacement, and gendered expectations, each mapped to one or more ACIR cognitive modes, Analytic, Creative, Intuitive, and Reflective, to assess how individuals

interpret symbolic cues. The protocol was reviewed for clarity, emotional sensitivity, and alignment with CVT and symbolic interactionism. Pilot testing with two participants confirmed question clarity and thematic relevance, as the study prioritizes contextual depth most. Ethical procedures were followed for this exploration in accordance with exempt research criteria involving minimal risk and anonymized, non-sensitive data, and participants were informed of their rights, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw at any time.

9. Qualitative Procedures

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach, recognized in social and behavioral sciences for its ability to capture lived experiences and interpret symbolic patterns in relational contexts. Narrative inquiry prioritizes depth and meaning making, making it suitable for exploring distortion archetypes such as emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection within gendered power dynamics. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews conducted via secure web-based platforms to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. Follow-up clarification was conducted as needed to clarify emerging themes, strengthening interpretive validity through member checking. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and psychological safety.

Participants were assigned codes to protect identity, and all data were stored securely on encrypted drives. Verbal recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participants were able to decline answering any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. Data analysis followed the standard six-phase thematic analysis process: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Codes were derived from theoretical constructs and emergent patterns, with trustworthiness ensured through member checking, debriefing, and an audit trail. Reflexive journaling documented analytic decisions to maintain transparency. These procedures aligned with APA qualitative research standards and social science best practices, emphasizing credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

10. Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, researcher bias refers to the potential influence of the researcher's perspectives, assumptions, or interpretive frameworks on the study's design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. While subjectivity is inherent to qualitative inquiry, maintaining rigor and trustworthiness requires deliberate strategies to mitigate bias and ensure that findings authentically reflect participants' experiences. This study acknowledges the possibility of bias arising from selective attention to data, overidentification with narratives, or interpretive framing that aligns too closely with theoretical expectations.

To address these risks, the research design incorporates multiple safeguards. Reflexive journaling is employed throughout the study to document analytic decisions and monitor interpretive tendencies. Interview protocols are semi-structured and open-ended, allowing participants to guide the narrative and reduce the imposition of researcher assumptions. Thematic analysis is conducted using a systematic, multi-phase approach to ensure transparency and consistency in coding and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, member checking is offered to participants to validate the accuracy of interpretations and enhance credibility. The ACIR framework is applied not only as an analytic tool but also as a cognitive scaffold to balance interpretation across analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective modes. These strategies collectively support the study's commitment to methodological integrity and reduce the likelihood of distortion due to researcher bias.

11. Results

This section presents the findings of 17 participants who engaged in 45 to 60 minute semi structured interviews. The sample included 18 plus secondary education students, early career professionals, mid career individuals, and retirees from both Global North and South regions, with intersectional identities including LGBTQ plus, ethnic minorities, disabled individuals, and male allies. The analysis identified four primary distortion archetypes, emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and symbolic displacement, each expressed through patterned interactional cues and interpreted through ACIR's analytic, intuitive, creative, and reflective modes.

Across exemplars, participants described moments in which emotional, relational, or communicative cues redirected agency or reframed contributions. In one instance, a participant presenting a procedural improvement encountered abrupt disappointment from a colleague, shifting the interaction from evaluating her idea to managing his emotional tone; this was coded as emotional baiting (analytic: shift from task to affect; intuitive: disproportionate disappointment; reflective: later recognition of manipulation). This moment also aligns with sensemaking theory, where individuals reinterpret ambiguous cues to maintain coherence under relational pressure.

Another participant described increased warmth and reassurance immediately after questioning a workflow decision, where sudden closeness softened her resistance and redirected the exchange toward relational harmony rather than substantive evaluation; this was coded as proximity (reflective: awareness of boundary softening; intuitive: relational pressure; analytic: recognition of diminished autonomy). This pattern reflects feminist interpretations of relational control, where proximity functions as a soft power mechanism that redirects agency. A third participant recounted offering a strategic solution that was reframed as helping out, redirecting recognition away from her leadership and positioning her contribution as supportive rather than directive; this was coded as relational deflection (analytic: role misalignment; intuitive: credit redirection; reflective: recognition of minimized authority). Alternative explanations such as extraneous role expectations may also contribute, where participants internalize supportive roles even when performing directive labor.

Together, these exemplars illustrate how patterned cues across emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection operate as symbolic mechanisms that obscure agency and redirect cognitive and relational labor. These patterns also align with broader communication research on misrecognition, where message framing shapes perceived legitimacy independent of actual contribution.

Participants reflected on symbolic displacement through emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and performative interaction. A dominant theme that emerged was emotional baiting, particularly in professional and institutional contexts. Early career LGBTQ participants described feeling emotionally misrepresented during team projects. Their responses revealed a pattern of reframing experiences using reflective reasoning, though several noted that their reframing did not lead to structural change. One participant stated, "I kept trying to explain myself, but the more I did, the more I felt like I was performing a role they had already assigned me." P3 described a recurring pattern in team meetings where her emotional responses were scrutinized more than her ideas.

"If I showed concern, it was dramatized. If I stayed quiet, I was disengaged. It felt like I was being baited into emotional labor just to prove I cared."

Her experience highlights emotional baiting as a symbolic tactic that compels affective performance while undermining intellectual legitimacy. Another included,

“I felt my role as an effective leader was compromised. How can I encourage leadership and development from my subordinates if I am cut off at the hip? Every time I tried to assert a strategic direction, someone would reframe it as emotional overreach. It wasn’t just disagreement, it was erasure.”

This illustrates how emotional baiting compels affective labor that masks power asymmetries. Outliers arose; P4 and P17 described emotional baiting from a managerial perspective. They suppressed personal frustration to maintain harmony, reflecting internalized expectations of emotional regulation.

Another theme involved proximity and strategic silence. Participants from the Global South with disabilities consistently reported strategic silence in meetings and proximity based minimization. They described being physically present but symbolically excluded, with one participant noting,

“They never said I couldn’t speak, but the silence around my ideas was louder than any rejection.”

P16 described a recurring experience where her ideas were acknowledged only when echoed by male peers. During a robotics competition, she proposed a design modification that was initially dismissed. Days later, a male teammate repeated the suggestion, and it was accepted.

“They didn’t even realize it was my idea,” she said. “I was invisible until someone else repeated my idea.”

This moment illustrates symbolic displacement through strategic silence and proximity based authority, where presentation does not guarantee recognition. Outliers arose; P6 used humor and visual cues to assert presence, diverging from others who relied on verbal clarification. Relational deflection and displacement were also present. Retirees and ethnic minorities describe long term patterns of relational deflection, particularly in community work and informal economies. Their economic contributions were consistently undervalued, and they used analytic reasoning to identify systemic patterns. One participant shared,

“I was always the one organizing, but when it came time for promotion, they looked elsewhere.”

This reflects how relational deflection redirects recognition away from women’s labor. Secondary education students from the Global South described gatekeeping in STEM clubs, where proximity and relational deflection limited access to mentorship roles. Their intuitive responses revealed early awareness of symbolic displacement, though they lacked institutional support to challenge it.

Participants with intersectional identities, particularly disabled individuals and ethnic minorities, reported compounded symbolic displacement. For example, P15 described being asked to represent diversity initiatives while being excluded from strategic decision making. Their response highlighted a pattern of performative inclusion, where symbolic representation masked structural exclusion. Additional narratives revealed nuanced expressions of symbolic displacement across professional, educational, and community settings. Mid career participants from the Global North described proximity based expectations in leadership roles, where their physical presence was used to imply agreement or support without explicit input. One participant noted,

“I was always in the room, but never really in the conversation.”

Four participants described experiences of performative inclusion, where they were represented in diversity or leadership roles but excluded from substantive decision-making

processes. These narratives often involve being invited to public facing events or panels while being omitted from strategic planning or policy discussions. One participant noted,

“They wanted my face, not my voice,”

capturing symbolic representation without agency. Across the sample, a unified theme emerged: symbolic displacement operates through subtle, normalized cues that compel emotional labor and obscure agency. While participants demonstrated awareness of symbolic manipulation, few possessed the tools to decode and disrupt these patterns effectively. Reflective and analytic reasoning were most common, particularly among mid career and retiree participants. Creative and intuitive reasoning appeared in only six participants and was rarely integrated into a full ACIR execution. Only two individuals demonstrated partial use of all four cognitive modes, suggesting a cognitive gap in versatility under pressure. This finding supports the study’s theoretical framework, indicating that while participants may possess awareness of symbolic manipulation, few are equipped with the adaptive cognitive tools necessary to decode and disrupt these patterns in real time. (See Figure 2 flow chart)

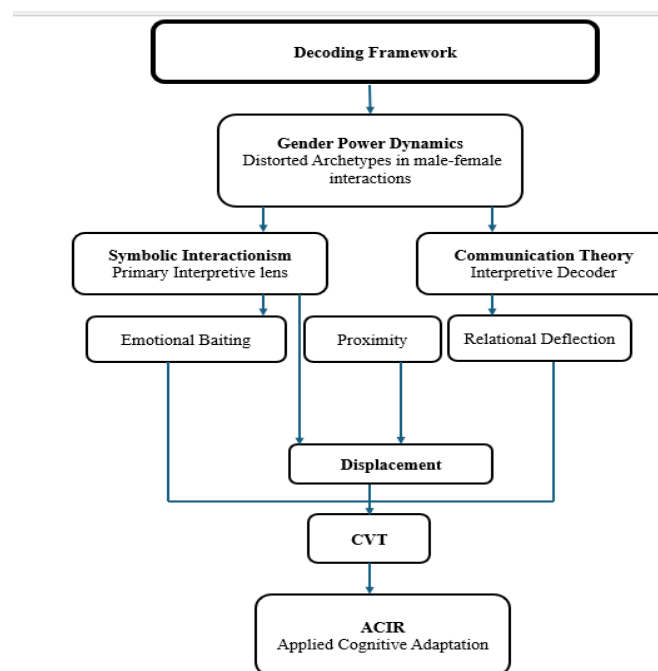


Figure 2. Decoding Gender Power Dynamics

12. Limitations and Boundary Conditions

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported narratives, which reflect participants’ interpretations rather than direct observation of interactional events. While the sample provided enough depth for thematic saturation, it is not intended to be statistically generalizable. Additionally, the ACIR framework emphasizes cognitive and interactional processes, and future research could benefit from incorporating behavioral or observational approaches to validate these dynamics. Contextual factors, including organizational culture and power hierarchies, may also shape how these patterns emerge, highlighting boundary conditions across settings.

13. Discussion and Recommendations

To strengthen analytic interpretation, themes were systematically aligned with ACIR cognitive modes. Emotional baiting corresponded with affective and reactive responses, while proximity reflected interpretive and relational positioning. Relational deflection involved constrained reflective processing, where participants recognized the dynamic but were limited in response capacity. Displacement emerged as a cumulative outcome when analytic and reflective engagement were insufficiently activated. This mapping demonstrates that ACIR functioned as an interpretive framework guiding analysis rather than a post hoc classification mechanism.

The implications reveal that distortion archetypes: emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement operate as interconnected symbolic strategies within gendered power dynamics. Outliers such as male allies and disabled participants offered insight into how symbolic displacement is resisted or reframed. These practices are performative and erosive, undermining agency, emotional stability, and professional legitimacy, reflecting earlier work showing that expression, role expectations, and recognition are structurally shaped rather than individually driven (Butler, 1990; Hochschild, 1983). Depending on internal impact, these strategies can destabilize confidence, obscure contributions, and perpetuate systemic inequities.

For this exploration, the integration of Symbolic Interactionism and Communication Theory provided interpretive depth for understanding how meaning making and message encoding sustain these dynamics, though these frameworks remain descriptive and lack operational mechanisms for real time decoding. The ACIR model addresses this gap by introducing adaptive cognitive modes analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective that enable individuals to recognize, reframe, and resist symbolic manipulation. This positions it as a practical tool for decoding theater, the performative behaviors that mask intent and perpetuate inequity. The implications extend to leadership development, organizational policy, and gender equity initiatives. Leadership programs can incorporate ACIR based modules such as analytic cue identification exercises for recognizing emotional baiting or relational deflection, and reflective prompts that guide reframing responses across cognitive modes to support proactive rather than reactive engagement.

Institutions should incorporate communication audits to identify symbolic messaging that perpetuates inequity and embed ACIR based interventions in professional development to foster resilience and adaptive reasoning. The study's findings also hold policy relevance for institutions implementing gender equity frames. Organizations can revise inclusion policies to ensure visibility is matched by agency. These insights support culturally responsive equity models that address symbolic manipulation across formal and informal domains. Future research should explore digital communication environments such as emerging sites of symbolic manipulation, where strategic silence and emotional misdirection are amplified.

14. Conclusion and Inferences

This small sample size research advances understanding of gendered power dynamics by conceptualizing distortion archetypes as symbolic strategies that manipulate emotional labor and relational positioning. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining Symbolic Interactionism, Communication Theory, and CVT, the study offers practical tools for decoding performative behaviors that obscure intent and reinforce asymmetry. The ACIR framework provides utility across organizational and educational settings, where training exercises support real-time identification of emotional baiting, proximity, and relational deflection, promoting reflective rather than reactive responses and reducing displacement as a cumulative outcome. At an applied level, these findings hold relevance for workplace dynamics, particularly in environments where relational tensions escalate into formal HR concerns. Analytic cue

identification and structured reflective prompts can be integrated into leadership development and early-stage conflict resolution processes, enabling individuals and supervisors to detect symbolic displacement, emotional labor imbalance, and relational misrecognition before they surface as grievances, performance issues, or collaboration. Organizational audits may assess how proximity, communication patterns, and role expectations shape access to recognition and authority where ACIR serves a diagnostic and preventative framework for correcting relational imbalances society faces today. These applications extend beyond interpretation, supporting its use as a tool for intervention and structural awareness.

Narrative inquiry provided an effective modality for capturing lived experiences and uncovering subtle communicative patterns, while the integration of ACIR modes offered a lens for examining cognitive responses in symbolic displacement across diverse populations, including STEM, LGBTQ, and age-related demographics. The findings suggest that decoding symbolic manipulation requires more than interpretive analysis; it demands cognitive adaptability. ACIR operationalize this adaptability, bridging theoretical insight with actionable strategies for resisting displacement and reclaiming agency. Future research must examine distortion archetypes that manifest in digital contexts, where mediated interactions intensify emotions, symbolic control, and explore variation across cultural settings, particularly in Global South contexts where relational expectations differ. This study offers a structured lens for decoding distortion archetypes, yet its relevance extends beyond theoretical discourse. Emotional baiting, proximity, relational deflection, and displacement shape everyday experiences in workplaces, homes, and digital environments, often operating through normalized behaviors that obscure agency. Tools such as the ACIR provide actionable strategies for navigating emotionally complex interactions, strengthening individual response capacity, and correcting imbalances before they become embedded within any relational system.

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Appendix A

Participant	Age Group	Region	Identity	Key Terms	Thematic Coding	Themes	ACTIR	Summary of Responses
P1	Early-Career	North	LGBTQ+	emotionally, misrepresented, reframed	Emotional Baiting, Relational Deflection	Emotional Misrepresentation	None	Emotional misrepresentation, confusion and reduced confidence.
P2	18+ secondary education	South	Female	exclusion	Institutionalized Misogyny, Relational Deflection	STEM Gatekeeping	Intuitive	Felt gatekept in STEM club; navigated exclusion using intuitive reasoning.
P3	Early-Career	North	Female	misrepresented and reframed	Emotional Baiting, Relational Deflection	Emotional Misrepresentation	Intuitive, Reflective, Analytic	Felt emotionally misrepresented during a team project; reframed experience using reflective reasoning.
P4	Mid-Career	North	Male Ally	conflict, frustration, expectations	Emotional Baiting, Performative Interaction	Emotional Suppression	Reflective, Intuitive, Analytic	Managed team conflict by suppressing personal frustration; reflected on emotional expectations.
P5	Early-Career	North	Female	emotionally, misrepresented, reframed	Emotional Baiting, Relational Deflection	Emotional Misrepresentation	Reflective	Undervalued during leadership meeting, assessed experience using reflective reasoning.
P6	Mid-Career	South	Disabled	silence	Proximity, Displacement	Strategic Silence	Reflective, Creative, Analytic	Experienced strategic silence in meetings; used creative reasoning to assert presence.
P7	Mid-Career	South	Female	silence	Institutionalized Misogyny, Relational Deflection	Strategic Silence	Creative	Silence in meetings; controlling impulsive postures to assert strength, action: applied creative reasoning to assert presence.
P8	Mid-Career	South	Disabled	deflection, intimidation	Proximity, Displacement	Strategic Silence	Reflective, Creative, Analytic	Experienced strategic silence in meetings; used creative reasoning to assert presence.
P9	Early-Career	North	LGBTQ+	emotionally, misrepresented, reframed	Emotional Baiting, Relational Deflection	Emotional Misrepresentation	Intuitive, Reflective	Project male toxicity; avoiding repeated encounters which restrict presence in leadership forums.
P10	Mid-Career	South	Disabled	silence, assert	Proximity, Displacement	Strategic Silence	Reflective, Creative, Analytic	Experienced strategic silence in meetings; used creative reasoning to assert presence.
P11	Entry-Level	North	Ethnic Minority	undervalued, patterns	Gender Power Dynamics, Displacement	Economic Invisibility	None	Contributions to community work undervalued; excused behavior as valid cause due to seniority.
P12	Retiree	North	Ethnic Minority	undervalued, patterns	Gender Power Dynamics, Displacement	Institutional structure and male preference	Reflective	Contributions to field work minimized; exercised general reasoning to identify patterns.
P13	Early-Career	North	LGBTQ+	emotionally, misrepresented, reframed	Emotional Baiting, Relational Deflection	Emotional Misrepresentation	Intuitive, Reflective, Analytic	Misrepresented during a joint project; reframed experience using reflective reasoning.
P14	Retiree	North	Female	undervalued, patterns	Gender Power Dynamics, Displacement	Economic Invisibility	Analytic, Reflective	Contributions to community work undervalued; used analytic reasoning to identify patterns.
P15	Mid-Career	South	Disabled	silence, assert	Proximity, Displacement	Strategic Silence	Reflective, Creative, Analytic	Experienced strategic silence in meetings; used creative reasoning to assert presence.
P16	18+ secondary education	South	Female	peer intimidation	Relational Deflection	STEM Gatekeeping	None	Felt restricted, embarrassed and limited in STEM program.
P17	Retiree	North	Ethnic Minority	undervalued, patterns	Gender Power Dynamics, Displacement	Economic Invisibility	Analytic, Reflective	Contributions to community work undervalued; used analytic reasoning to identify patterns.