

Human Trafficking, Coercion and Activism: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis  
of Activists Perspectives on Human Trafficking

by

Steven Joseph

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2023 by the  
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Lindsey Mean, Co-Chair  
Jameien Taylor, Co-Chair  
Michael Walker

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2023

## ABSTRACT

This master's thesis reports on the experiences and understandings about coercion into human trafficking of activists working in the field. Trafficking exists as a wholly exploitative process which impacts both the psychological state of being of victims as well as their overall lived, day-to-day experience. A qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized for this research to gain understanding of the experiences of activists working in the field of trafficking. Given IPA as the method of inquiry, emphasis was placed on achieving an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Using a semi-structured interview guide, six different activists in the field of human trafficking were interviewed to gain an understanding of the coercive methods of traffickers, the socio-political realities surrounding trafficking as well as an individualized understanding of what trafficking is like for the victims. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes and subthemes according to the stipulations of IPA. Three themes emerged from this analysis on trafficking. The first theme addressed basic needs. Participants speak to how traffickers' primary method of recruitment centers around the supplication of basic needs otherwise not provided for. In the second theme, activists reported on the socio-political realities involving trafficking and how that impacts victim identification and recruitment into the life of trafficking. In the third theme, activists reported on the psychological consequences of trafficking during recruitment, being in traffic and once they get out of the life of trafficking and into rehabilitation.

I dedicate this document to my parents, elder siblings, and my entire extended family. My father, Dr. Dominic Joseph, and mother, Nuja Joseph, have never wavered in their support of my endeavors, and for that my gratitude knows no bounds. Our family line is that of critical thinkers and problem solvers. Those who consistently question the norms and power structures which govern society and work to find active solutions to those problems. My entire family has provided me with the foundation since childhood to think critically about the way that power affects society and how that power affects marginalized communities. I will forever have gratitude for the lessons they instilled in me and their work and conduct of character continues to inspire me to this day.

I would like to thank my friends both in the cohort and beyond. All of you held me up and afloat during the toughest times of this process. Every day, all of you gave me an ear and would offer helpful advice, comfort or the like when I needed it most. The patience you had for me during this process is not something I will ever forget, and I will work always to reciprocate the same patience and kindness that you all have shown me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. As a student of ASU, I acknowledge that the Tempe campus sits on the ancestral homelands of those American Indian tribes that have inhabited this place for centuries, including the Akimel O'odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) peoples. It is of utmost importance to acknowledge in the spirit of this thesis that these peoples were violently displaced and as such it is necessary to acknowledge these ancestral lands.
2. This thesis would not have been possible in any capacity without Dr. Heather Curry of the University of South Florida. Dr. Curry worked tirelessly with me and personally invited me to her home in Tampa and introduced me to the participants utilized for this study. Her insights both before and after the defense proved invaluable in illuminating to me the true utility of this phenomenological work. I have eternal gratitude for her unwavering efforts, care, and empathy for those who have been oppressed by violent societal forces.
3. I want to extend my gratitude to my committee for their guidance in my research and for taking the time to serve as committee members. My committee throughout the course of the thesis worked tirelessly to ensure that my document was up to par, even personally working with me late into the night in order to ensure that it was as good as possible. I have unwavering appreciation for their efforts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Definitions .....	2
Literature Review .....	6
History of Human Trafficking.....	11
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.....	18
Interpretive Phenomenology and Human Trafficking.....	26
2 METHOD .....	33
Participants.....	33
Interview Design.....	34
Procedure.....	36
3 FINDINGS .....	37
Theme 1: Basic Needs .....	37
Theme 2: Sociopolitical Realities .....	41
Theme 3: Psychological Consequences.....	50
4 DISCUSSION .....	57
5 CONCLUSION .....	78
REFERENCES .....	80

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking as a concept is a wholly exploitative process wherein the exploitation occurs across multiple levels of a potential victims' lived experience. Moreover, lived experience as a concept implies a need to understand trafficked people beyond their psychology (Reid et al., 2005). The key utility of interpretive phenomenology is to provide a holistic picture, as such it is a useful approach for the exploration of what it is like to be trafficked from the recruitment process to the end of the trafficking life. In order to fully understand this, purely psychological or sociological methods of inquiry prove insufficient due to their focus on a more macro understanding of trafficking and other issues. Psychological perspectives look at trafficking exclusively from the micro level and sociological perspectives tend to place emphasis on macro elements of trafficking. Interpretive Phenomenology on the other hand, as a concept, encapsulates the sum total of a person's experience and seeks to codify that experience through formalized analysis (Reid et al., 2005). The trafficking process not only affects a person's psychological state of mind, but also their normalized existence, the way they conduct their day-to-day lives as well as the structural consequences that result from being trafficked.

The dearth of current quantitative research on human trafficking, as well as the reliability issues inherent to the ones which exist, means there is need for more research on this topic. In particular, scholars point to how there exists a need for research driven by an unbiased understanding of the micro elements of human trafficking (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Sukatch, Castañeda, Pickens, 2018). Given this void in the research

regarding human trafficking, this research aimed to contribute to the existing literature on trafficking by providing an understanding of the experiences of those directly involved in the field of trafficking. The primary purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of those working in the field of trafficking and gain understanding about the coercive methods involved in trafficking. Interpretive phenomenology as a method emphasizes lived experiences and as such it was the suitable line of inquiry in order to gain an unbiased understanding of activists' perspectives on human trafficking as well as their perspectives on the actual experience of being trafficked. As such and given the exploitative nature of trafficking, interpretive phenomenology serves as an appropriate method in order to gain an adequate picture of what trafficking is like from a micro perspective.

### **Definitions**

Human trafficking has many definitions and creating a singular and definitive meaning for human trafficking is part of the ongoing debate found in the vast body of literature (Dempsey, Hoyle, Bosworth, 2018; Sukach et al., 2018). However, it is not that scholars and politicians lack any concept of what human trafficking is but, rather, there exists a lack of standardization in the international community on defining human trafficking (Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, 2015; Weitzer, 2014). In 2000, the United Nations (UN) came together and established a robust protocol for establishing what qualifies as human trafficking despite the historical lack of consensus on defining human trafficking at the international level. Though the UN's definition is far from international standardization and is by no means exhaustive, it provides an overview of human trafficking with defined elements and criteria. These elements and criteria by the UN

provide a snapshot of what human trafficking looks like, what it encapsulates and how to identify it. The contemporary definition of sex trafficking as stated by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (Meshkovska et al., 2015, p. 381).

The UN includes three essential elements to meet the criteria for human trafficking. The first is 'action' which involves the recruitment, transport, harboring, or receipt of captured persons. The second is 'means' or the threat of the use of force, fraud, abduction, and the like in order to gain control over another for an extended period of time. Means also includes the giving or receiving of payments related to the harboring, transport, and capture of a person for the purposes of profit. The third and final element is known as 'purpose' wherein the end of the action and means is for the purposes of (Meshkovska et al., 2015, p. 381). Moreover, human trafficking distinguishes itself from similar forms of exploitation such as smuggling as they carry a different set of stipulations.

Human trafficking proves distinct from human smuggling as human smuggling involves by and large the active consent of the individuals involved while human trafficking does not (Sukach et al., 2018; Gallagher, 2002). An example of the former



scenario is how escapees from North Korea might be smuggled across the border into China to escape from an oppressive regime. This does not qualify as human trafficking because the consent of those being smuggled has been established before the transportation, harboring and payment takes place (Gallagher, 2002; Hee-Soon, 2019; Sukach et al., 2018). This is not to say that harmful things do not occur during the process of smuggling, in fact, during the smuggling of North Korean Escapees, Hee-Soon details in their report many instances of abuse and mistreatment by brokers of smuggling (Hee-Soon, 2019). Rather, smuggling proves distinct from trafficking due to the issues of consent involved (Hee-Soon, 2019). Indeed, as discussed further below, the issue of consent creates much contention in both academic and political circles regarding what counts as human trafficking and what does not. In short, there exists a vast divide in academic, political, and feminist circles about what consent entails, how it is implemented and whether consent implies trafficking or not.

In particular, the coercive methods involved, political, social, and criminological realities surrounding human trafficking, challenges facing activists and how these elements impact trafficked individuals. The way that this study chose to examine sex trafficking was through delineation of interviews and the creation of more conversational style interviews in order to gain understanding of their experiential world (McKnight, 2022; Reid et al., 2005). The definition of sex trafficking itself also carries through lots of debate in academic circles and there exists sparse academic consensus on a singular definition for sex trafficking despite the UN laying out stipulations in their protocol (Dempsey et al., 2012, pp. 137). Dempsey and his coauthors elaborate on this point stating that international agreement by the United Nations on the definition of sex

trafficking did not take place until 2000 (p. 137). The lateness by which the United Nations defined sex trafficking speaks both to its novelty as a research concept as well as its relative lack of agreement in the international community. Sex trafficking as a concept has existed since ancient times, but never in history has international standardization of sex trafficking been established. As such, the UN's protocol on sex trafficking in 2000 serves as the first instance where the international community defines sex trafficking.

Sex trafficking as a concept is defined by the United Nations according to the standards set by their human trafficking definition (Meshkovska et al., 2015). The main caveat to the UN's definition of human trafficking when considering sex trafficking exclusively is that the type of exploitation involves the trading of people for sex related acts (Gallagher, 2001; Meshkovska et al., 2015). A key part of the debate surrounding the definition of sex trafficking comes down to the issue of consent. The UN protocol on sex trafficking states that "whether non-coerced, adult migrant prostitution should be included in the definition of trafficking" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 984). As it stands now, there exists debate in academic, feminist, and political circles about where things like prostitution and pornography stand as one side believes that prostitution can never be voluntary while others believe prostitutes and pornographic actors act with full knowledge and consent and as such are not being abused. (Meshkovska et al., 2015, p. 382). This legislative and interpretive issue of trafficking creates an impact in that the relative prosecution difficulty of traffickers becomes difficult due to this conflation. This is because law enforcement has a poor understanding of trafficking and is not given the adequate knowledge to differentiate between someone who is prostituting themselves of their own will and someone who is being trafficked (Meshkovska et al., 2015, p. 382).

## Literature Review

The literature review highlights three key areas of importance for this interpretive phenomenological analysis. The first concerns historical sociological and criminological approaches to human trafficking. The second concerns the current climate of human trafficking and what that looks like according to sociological, criminological, and phenomenological perspectives. The third focuses on interpretive phenomenology as a concept, as a method of inquiry, and as an approach that is particularly useful for the study of human trafficking.

Sociological and criminological texts on human trafficking often emphasize the macro elements of trafficking such as its scope, as well as hard and fast statistics on its prevalence throughout society (Lutya, 2009, pp. 59-78). There exists consensus that the usage of hard and fast statistics alone to evaluate human trafficking as a subject proves insufficient and that some statistics have a low degree of reliability (De Vries and Cockbain 2023; Feingold, 2005; Kosmas, Melander, Singerhouse, Sharkey, Maass, Barrick, Martin, 2023). Some criminological texts emphasize the legislative barriers to prosecution of traffickers due to language of trafficking legislation, discrete methods of traffickers and lack of willingness to prosecute on the part of the state all exist as part of the legislative barriers that impact trafficking prosecution (Lutya, 2009; McKnight, 2022). Part of the phenomenological work of human trafficking involves understanding the individualized experience of those being trafficked.

Some of the impetus for performing more qualitative, experienced based studies is to create new knowledge and understand tools that can be used for the purpose of seeing a phenomenon such as human trafficking in novel ways (McKnight, 2022, p. 98).

Moreover, performing these more qualitative, experienced based studies can serve as a springboard for understanding how they might influence quantitative studies on the subject of trafficking. Finally, having an experienced based understanding of human trafficking through phenomenology creates a more holistic picture of what it is actually like to be trafficked. Micro elements of human trafficking being misunderstood by scholars creates issues in the way that quantitative data is gathered and reported. For one, the lack of a centralized reporting agency for human trafficking stems from reliability issues in the statistics themselves (Lutya, 2009; McKnight, 2022). Human trafficking research undertaken by sociological and criminological academic circles seldom utilizes qualitative methods in order to increase their depth of understanding of the phenomena (McKnight, 2022). Moreover, criminological, and sociological texts on human trafficking emphasize the gathering of statistics that help to illustrate the phenomena's larger impact on society while limiting the reporting of its impact on the individuals involved (McKnight, 2022). This connects to the failure of lawmakers and enforcement in the United States to prosecute trafficking as well as the conflation between prostitution and trafficking. Law enforcement has been shown throughout the history of trafficking in the United States to falsely arrest consenting sex workers under the assumption that they are being trafficked (Lutya, 2009). Part of the issue with prosecuting trafficking comes down to law enforcement attitudes about sex trafficking being inaccurate or ideologically flawed (Farrel et al., 2008). Creating this experienced based understanding of phenomenology serves in illustrating an accurate picture of trafficking from an individualized perspective, but the true utility is through education and dissemination of

information about the experience of trafficking to the mainstream. Otherwise, the utility of experienced based studies about trafficking remains limited.

Human trafficking violates the human rights of victims repeatedly, for long durations and changes their normalized day to day existence. Understanding of the victims' lived experiences both as trafficked people in process, as well as the coercion process utilized to recruit them proves the primary purpose of interpretive phenomenological analysis. In order to understand the *lifeworld* of those being trafficked, understanding of coercion in particular is key as it is the originating point of the exploitative process of human trafficking (Reid et al., 2005). Phenomenology as a concept concerns experience and the circumstances surrounding experience above all else and as such serves as a suitable method for understanding the lived experiential world of those being trafficked. Moreover, understanding impacts that human trafficking has on the individual has multiple uses in terms of both understanding the victims' wants and needs, as well as further depth of understanding to the criminological and sociological realities surrounding human trafficking (McKnight, 2022). Employing interpretive phenomenology in an analysis on human trafficking helps in gaining deeper insight into the processes of human trafficking that differ from more macro approaches such as sociology and criminology; IPA helps create better understanding of the impacts of human trafficking on an individual's state of being.

According to McKnight (2022) research which explores perceptions, opinions and experience in this case should be guided by ontology. Ontology in the phenomenological tradition encapsulates being but also the experience which makes up that being. Heidegger refers to these things as *dasein* or 'being in the world' (Heidegger,

1927). State of being refers to a particular object, person, or entity's ontology. In the Heideggerian sense, *dasein* comprises ontology. Moreover, in Heidegger's *Being in Time* he states specifically that *dasein* exists as a primary form of being for human beings wherein they must confront their personhood, mortality, and the paradox of living with other humans while simultaneously being alone with oneself (Heidegger, 1927). The Heideggerian notion of *dasein* carries critical weight when discussing ontology as the stipulations laid out in *Being in Time* show that being in the world cannot be reduced to a singular epistemic quality such as psychology. Ontology is a branch of metaphysics which deals with the organization and structure of the state of being for individuals, groups, and other entities (McKnight, 2022). In research on ontology, philosophers attempt to answer questions such as "what being is?" and "what are the features common to all beings?" (McKnight, 2022). Moreover, it is important to differentiate ontology in phenomenology as phenomenology exists as a method and ontology is the meta-concept which guides the method of phenomenology (McKnight, 2022). Ontology is relevant to this study of phenomenology and human trafficking because of how the coercive methods utilized by traffickers affects prospective victims.

McKnight's vision of ontology harkens back to the original Heideggerian notion of *dasein* or 'being in the world' wherein being exists not as an individualized epistemic quality like psychology. Rather, being, in the Heideggerian sense encapsulates the way that individualized epistemic quality interacts with the world, and what results from that (Heidegger, 1927). The exploitative process of human trafficking exists such that not only is the psychology of the individuals being targeted, but also their normalized existence and state of being. Moreover, the preeminent harm of trafficking in terms of

phenomenology is that one's 'being in the world' or *dasein* is willfully controlled by another person. Phenomenology concerns experience and ontology is about the being which results from having experienced things in the world (McKnight, 2022). As such, during the recruitment process of trafficking it is not only the psychological state of being that is changing, but also the literal actions and normalized day-to-day existence of trafficking victims.

When it comes down to trafficking, traffickers target not merely the individual's psychology as the coercive process seeks to change the normalized existence of those being targeted. Given the stipulations of *dasein* by Heidegger, as well as McKnight's definitions on ontology it stands that phenomenology as a method concern lived experience and does not reduce such experience to an individual's psychology. Rather, phenomenology, in the context of human trafficking emphasizes that the targets of traffickers are the living circumstances surrounding targets as well as their individualized psychology. According to the stipulations set out by Heidegger and McKnight then, it stands that ontology comprises both individual epistemic qualities such as psychology as well as external circumstances and experiences. Ontology exists as the philosophical subject which guides the methodological implementation of phenomenology (McKnight, 2022). Phenomenology considers not only the psychological state of entities but also the circumstances which influence said psychology as well as the actions which result. The individual's state of being in this case encapsulates their psychological circumstances and individual epistemological leanings as well as the social and political realities surrounding them.

The primary goal of interpretive phenomenology is to understand the *lifeworld* of participants in the interviews themselves. Through utilization of interpretive phenomenology, this study contributes to the research milieu of trafficking by first and foremost gaining an understanding of the individualized lived experiences of activists working on the front lines of human trafficking. It is also of importance to note that given the stipulations and experienced based nature of interpretive phenomenological analysis, examination of the perspectives of survivors themselves, traffickers, pimps, johns, or other realms of trafficking could prove pertinent for future research goals.

### **History and Criminology of Human Trafficking**

The history of human trafficking has roots in institutionalized slavery since ancient times. (Hussein, 2015, p. 138). Chattel slavery exists as the original institutionalized form of human trafficking; eventually eradicated in the 19th century from every great power's legislation (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 569). However, the end of slavery's institutionalized version moved it further into the underground and now, without the protection of the state, became the criminal enterprise known as human trafficking (Hussein, 2015; Zimmerman, 2011). Since the eradication of chattel slavery, marked changes in the modus operandi of traffickers evince themselves in modern day human trafficking. Zimmerman elaborates on this point and states that "Today, slavery is not necessarily a lifelong condition and often lasts for a significantly shorter duration. The key attribute of modern-day slavery is not the duration of enslavement but the enactment of violent control of one person by another" (p. 567).

The method of recruitment as well as the capture conditions involved in modern day human trafficking have differing effects on the psychology of the victims than chattel



slavery. The differences between chattel slavery and modern-day human trafficking provides insights on how modern-day slavery takes place and how it uniquely affects its victims (Ngwe and Elechi, 2012, pp. 106-107). Key aspects of chattel slavery include, lifelong ownership, segregation by ethnicity, relative maintenance and care of the slaves and legal ownership. Modern-day human trafficking on the other hand has an entirely different set of characteristics which define its circumstances. For human trafficking in the modern day: avoidance of legal ownership to stay under the radar, no obligation of maintenance, short term relationships, non-segregated and the idea that slaves are disposable (Ngwe and Elechi, 2012, pp. 106-107). As a result of no state sponsorship by the world's largest economies, the enterprise of human trafficking moved into the criminal underworld. Human trafficking and the harmful consequences associated with it, happens behind closed doors, away from the eyes of authority such as law enforcement, activists, and rescuers, as well as legal professionals looking to prosecute traffickers (Hussein, 2015; Zimmerman, 2011).

The relative discreteness and private nature of modern trafficking has created numerous legal barriers in the prosecution of modern human trafficking. In the United States, part of that legal barrier to prosecution comes down to the relationship between state and federal jurisdiction systems. According to Farrell et al., (2012) despite a 50% increase in funding for the Department of Justice in 2012 to prosecute trafficking, they still struggle in federally prosecuting human traffickers for their crimes (p. 2). This is because very few of the totality of criminal cases make it to a federal court for evaluation. Rather, state, and local jurisdictions have been historically responsible for the prosecution of crime and as such human trafficking often falls under their purview. According

to Farrell et al., (2012) state legislatures' wide variation on laws regarding trafficking has created legal loopholes that traffickers can exploit in order to reify the business.

Traffickers are aware of and will exploit legal realities involved with trafficking in order to widen their base.

At the state level, federal efforts to grant legislative flexibility to states have created a lack of standardization across the United States both in terms of what qualifies as human trafficking and legal statutes which delineate prosecution processes, and the steps lawmakers and legal professionals should take to effectively prosecute traffickers. Farrell et al. (2012) elaborate on these efforts stating that:

The DOJ developed the Model State Anti-Trafficking Criminal Statute, which was widely disseminated as the first model state law. The DOJ model legislation covered both 'labor,' which absent coercion or force would normally be lawful employment, and 'services,' which include unlawful activities such as prostitution. (p. 3)

However, the issue is that the state legislation became difficult to implement due to the language of the federal legislation. In particular, the difference between 'labor' and 'services' became contentious among states because commercial sex acts were considered services rather than labor. Moreover, this issue becomes further complicated in terms of the legislative language because most states do not have clear laws which differentiate between sex work (e.g., prostitution, pornography) and human trafficking. How the conflation between labor and services is resolved has important implications for the prosecution of human trafficking (Parreñas et al., 2012). Notably, the conflation

between ‘labor’ and ‘services’ ought to be resolved in order to remove the contentious issue between considering commercial sex acts prostitution or forms of trafficking.

The conflation of sex work and human trafficking proves as one of many interpretive barriers in the legislative language surrounding human trafficking (Farrell, McDevitt, Pfeffer, Fahy, Owens, Dank, Adams, 2012). The conflation exists as a primary interpretive barrier to prosecution of traffickers in particular because traffickers exploit legal realities in order to reify the trafficking business. Traffickers are aware of and will modify their recruitment methods based on the particular legal reality that they find themselves in. These types of legislative language deficiencies allow states too much room for interpretation on the implementation of the federal law and as such “State anti-trafficking laws differ widely in both the definition of what actions constitute a human trafficking crime and the focus of the state response to the problem” (p. 4). The lack of consistency among state laws regarding human trafficking contributes to its prosecution difficulty because the differences between state laws are exploited by traffickers in order to reify the business of trafficking (Parreñas, Hwang, Lee, 2012). The number of trafficking cases that exist and are currently at large vastly outweighs the number of trafficking cases that are prosecuted (Farrell et al., 2012, p. 4). Moreover, the primary focus of many anti human trafficking groups is to attempt to clean up this legislative language and make clearer the stipulations for prosecution of a human trafficker.

Sociological and criminological minds working on human trafficking seek to understand the phenomenon through a macro lens. Instead of focusing on the lived experiences of those being trafficked, the traffickers themselves or the activists working on the field, sociological research focuses on hard facts and statistics about human

trafficking as well as its place in broad society (Balfour, Callands, Okech, Kombian, 2020, p. 333; Sertich and Heemskerk, 2011). For example, Balfour et al., (2020) speak to the notion of resource misallocation as a primary impetus driving human trafficking in stating that “Furthermore ... many Ghanaians from impoverished communities often seek occupational opportunities outside of their communities of origin, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation” (Balfour et al., 2020, p. 333). This type of information echoes other common sociological perspectives on human trafficking (Parrenas et al., 2012; Sertich and Heemskerk, 2011). These types of sociological perspectives prove valuable in providing a macro understanding of trafficking. However, scholars report that in the field of trafficking there exists a lack of qualitative, experienced based research which encapsulates what it is actually like to be trafficked from coercion to escape.

Sociological studies often do not look at the nature of reality according to the individual, but rather they seek to extrapolate abstract individual experiences into something concrete and numbers based so that broad conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, scholarly consensus in both the sociological and criminological circles shows that there exists a deep lack of qualitative experience-based research on human trafficking (Aronowitz, 2010). There also exists distinct issues in the way that statistics are gathered with regards to human trafficking. Aronowitz (2010) states that,

Where action is taken and statistics are collected, there is often no centralized agency collecting data on human trafficking. Statistics may be reported on an ad hoc basis by individual Government agencies operating at a local or regional (state) level, by non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) or the press. Rarely are these data sources linked. Reports that even within a country ... Data are collected

for different purposes and ... vary according to the context and source of information (Aronowitz, 2010, p. 493).

In short, the data, due to a lack of centralized data collection structure for the purposes of human trafficking, is dubious and contains unlinked and unrelated data sources, making averaging of this data spurious at best and misleading at worst. The dearth of centralized data leads to this lack of consensus on key quantitative aspects of human trafficking.

These aspects include the ability to describe accurate demographics of who exactly is most vulnerable to trafficking as well as the targeting demographics or how traffickers pick a particular populace. In addition, there exists a lack of centralized data and academic consensus on the way the language of trafficking ought to be drafted. The drafted legislation of trafficking involves an understanding of trafficking with regards to the law. The law includes stipulations both on how to prosecute and under what criteria prosecution is necessary. However, state lines have differing definitions and stipulations for trafficking which contribute to its relative statistical unreliability and prosecution difficulty (Aronowitz, 2010).

Common presuppositions utilized in sociological research include the relationship between globalization and trafficking, the relationship between low socioeconomic class and trafficking as well as the relationship between trauma and vulnerability to being trafficked. (Limoncelli 2009; Ravi, Pfeiffer, Rosner, Shea, 2017; Serich and Heemswork, 2011). In each of these instances, the scholars utilize said presuppositions as the impetus for conducting their research. These classic sociological takes might hold true for certain populations or even a large majority of the population. However, these types of studies

prove insufficient in interrogation of both the motivations of the perpetrators and the individualized psychology of their targets.

Classic sociological approaches to studying human trafficking prove adequate in both creating new theories surrounding the topic and providing robust empirical data which highlights trends in the realm of human trafficking. For example, Lerum and Bentz state that “the most productive research on sex work problematizes context and highlights intersectional positionality when making empirical generalizations” (Lerum and Bentz, 2016, pp. 17). Empirical generalizations carry a certain degree of utility. Empirical analysis of human trafficking and sex work highlights the scope of the subject and provides data on how ingrained it is in a particular community.

The impact of the sociological approach ought not be understated as it has led to the creation of important databases for the tracking of human trafficking around the globe. The most notable example of said impact is the TIP (Trafficking in Persons) report released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime every year. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking across the globe and provides adequate context in understanding the broad strokes causes of human trafficking and the exact scope of the issue (UNODC, 2022). Classic sociological research on human trafficking proves limited for several varied reasons, but crucially, it fails in providing an adequate picture of what the relationship is like between a trafficker and their victims. Rather, sociological studies seek to perform broad strokes analysis on human trafficking while attempting to produce quantitative or qualitative theories which support their analysis. The sociological research about human trafficking does not interpret the

individualized epistemic circumstances of the traffickers and those that they are recruiting (Lerum and Bentz, 2016; Limoncelli, 2009; Serich and Heemswork, 2011).

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the primary method of inquiry being utilized for this study and as such a thorough understanding of literature dealing with phenomenology and trafficking, epistemology, and trafficking as well as an evaluation on the purpose and utility of interpretive phenomenology will be analyzed in this section. IPA is a qualitative method of inquiry utilized to study the lived experiences of the participants in a study. IPA often involves a small sample size, with in-depth interviews conducted so that the whole lived experience of the participant can be ascertained. These interviews are semi structured in nature and function like a conversation (Reid et al., 2005). This section of the literature review covers literature dealing with IPA as a method, its justification as well as a few phenomenological studies dealing with human trafficking itself. Hermeneutic phenomenology ascertains how a given person in a given context makes sense of a situation or ‘phenomena’ (Deetz, 1973). According to Reid et al. (2005) the origin of interpretive phenomenological analysis lies in the field of psychology wherein it offers “psychologists the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts – research participants themselves. What is it like to experience auditory hallucinations, or chronic pain, for example? (p. 20). The original usage of interpretive phenomenology as a method was to aid in the research and development of clinical psychiatric and psychological practices in order to better help patients.

A key aspect of clinical psychology is to be able to understand and empathize with the experiences of their patients and as such this type of research proves invaluable

in the realm of psychology (Reid et al., 2005). This type of research method utilizes an idiographic philosophy of knowledge to guide its implementation (Love, Vetere, Davis, 2020; Reid et al., 2005). Idiography implies a focused viewpoint on the individual, meaning that it attempts to answer questions that have to do with experience and the circumstances surrounding individuals (Love et al., 2020). Idiographic approaches to knowledge “imply a reflection on and a critical discussion of the implicit assumption of the ergodicity theorem in mainstream psychology research” (Picione, 2015, p. 363). According to the ergodicity theorem in psychology “a specimen is assumed to be homogeneous in some respects—the one of interest to the research—to all the other members of the sample” (Picione, 2015, p. 363). It is of importance to note that Picione (2015) is not stating that the sample itself is homogenous (i.e., consisting of the same exact types of participants) rather, the sample contains related participants in terms of categorization and are examined independently.

They are examined utilizing focused in depth interviews in order to preserve the uniqueness and quality of each participant and to ensure that the most accurate representation of their particular experience is gleaned (Love et al., 2020; Picione, 2015; Reid et al., 2005). Finally, Picione goes on to state interpretive phenomenology and similar idiographic methods of research are categorically opposed to the establishment of “averages and bell-curve distributions for populations” because doing so confirms the qualities and aspects of the participant already assumed by the researcher and fails in its attempt to create new knowledge (Picione, 2015, p. 363). The particular utility in an idiographic approach is to avoid hypostatization of knowledge, wherein something abstract is treated as a concrete reality. In essence, an interpretive phenomenological



analysis serves as the opposite of positivist interpretations of research wherein hard facts and statistics are prioritized over the lived experience of participants.

From minor acts of violence to ethnic cleansing, there exists some sort of communicative act that precedes the actual violence that occurs (Chapman-Schmidt, 2019, p. 183). Chapman-Schmidt (2019) as well as Dugassa (2008) speak to this phenomenon and terms it ‘epistemic violence’ (Chapman-Schmidt, 2019; Dugassa, 2008). Dugassa (2008) elaborates further and states that epistemic violence exists as “Epistemological assumptions, or assumptions about the validity of particular knowledge, are associated with the identification with or exclusion of (including through violence) certain groups of people” (p. 16). Moreover, there exist two key elements involved in the notion of epistemic violence. These are the proverbial ‘other’ which exists in phenomenology as well as the notion of knowledge or ‘epistemes’ (Teo, 2010, p. 298). Teo (2010) elaborates stating that,

Epistemological violence is a practice that is executed in empirical articles and books in psychology, when theoretical interpretations regarding empirical results implicitly or explicitly construct the *Other* as inferior or problematic, despite the fact that alternative interpretations, equally viable based on the data, are available (Teo, 2010, p. 298).

Epistemic violence as a concept provides an important justification for the usage of interpretive phenomenology as a method because it showcases evidence that ‘violence’ as a concept does not start and end with physical harm. Rather, violence is a product of the epistemological and ontological leanings present within the perpetrator of violence and the person being targeted.

In essence, there exists an epistemological, coercive imperative for violence which precedes the actual violent acts taking place. Sex trafficking serves as a breeding ground for this type of epistemic violence. Chapman-Schmidt (2019) speaks to this point by pointing out how a law known as FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) “aims not only to target sex workers with criminal sanctions, but also to cut off the means they have to express themselves online—in effect, to silence them, along with the people and organizations that support them” (p. 180). The FOSTA act frames itself as an anti-trafficking organization when in practice they censor the efforts of sex workers to make a living. Instances of the FOSTA act exist as epistemic violence because of how it creates a false narrative and performs actions counterintuitive to the narrative they claim to protect. Moreover, the concept of epistemic violence provides important utility in understanding the individualized experiences of those being trafficked. Trafficking is primarily a violent act wherein the process of trafficking, violence or the threat of violence is necessarily used as a form of control. The ‘othering’ aspect of epistemic violence is also of particular importance when it comes down to trafficking. According to Tordes (2023) part of the ‘othering’ effect of human trafficking originates in the mainstream conception of the topic. Tordes reports that mainstream portrayals of trafficking in the media:

overlooked important realities of human trafficking, including the fact that globally the majority of exploited girls and boys are not white, while reinforcing stereotypes that ‘other’ cultures value children less and thus will sell their children while white Western families must be victims (Tordes, 2023, p. 607).

Moreover, Tordes also speaks to the psychological aspects of othering, that which takes place outside of the context of mediated messages. Tordes (2023) argues specifically that overcoming otherness and the epistemic violence which results from othering requires “overcoming deep-seated beliefs of the lesser value of “others” and acknowledging a truer picture of the Self and the role that the Self, or dominant group, plays not only in helping others but also in the exploitation of particular populations” (p. 608). Tordes argues that those involved in the active recruitment and sex trafficking of victims have to create in their own mind a way to rationalize their action and rationalization of this action occurs through denigration and othering of the people they are targeting.

The epistemic qualities of the violence that victims of human trafficking experience involve three distinct aspects of othering. First, is the othering which occurs within the mainstream conception of human trafficking and how it is portrayed in the media. Inaccurate depictions of trafficked people and misrepresentation through the media create a false societal perception of trafficking and further undermine marginalized groups who are most vulnerable to trafficking. Second, there is the conception that those who are being trafficked somehow deserve to be in that position, or that they could have prevented the situation from happening in the first place. Third and finally, otherizing is the primary method by which traffickers participate in the denigration of their targets so that they rationalize their exploitation of vulnerable populaces during the process of trafficking. Epistemic violence exists as a central guiding concept for this thesis as it encapsulates the particular type of violence being reified by sex trafficking. The structural, tangible violence inherent to sex trafficking proves incontrovertible as the act of trafficking for sex involves the violent violation of trafficked people’s bodies.

However, when considering the sociopolitical realities of trafficking codified by scholars in the literature review, the statistical unreliability of current quantitative data as well as the holistic exploitation of the coercive process itself; epistemic violence exists as a concept which encapsulates the language, symbols and perceptions which precede more structural forms of violence involved in the trafficking trade. In a practical sense then, epistemic violence in the realm of trafficking can be seen in inaccurate media portrayals, poor education on the topic as well as legislation which inhibits the protection of people from the structural violence associated with trafficking.

A key reason for conducting the interpretive phenomenological analysis reported here was to gain insight into not only the actual physical harm that goes on during sex trafficking, but also to illuminate the epistemological violence which takes place long before any sort of physical violence takes place. The epistemological violence experienced by prospective victims of human trafficking originate from several sources, with most of the literature on the topic speaking to sociological and political realities surrounding human trafficking being the main contributors (Chapman-Schmidt, 2019; Dugassa, 2008; Teo, 2010). However, it is not only the sociopolitical realities which create epistemological violence, epistemological violence lies in the coercive methods and recruitment tactics utilized by traffickers both in the form of mediated messages crafted for the purposes of recruitment as well as direct forms of violence. This is because these methods of recruitment often involve the exploitation of preexisting psychological vulnerabilities or the creation of new psychological vulnerabilities by the traffickers themselves.

Through phenomenology, attempts are made to understand the “stuff language is made of” outside of the realm of common sense (Teo, 2010). Phenomenology as a philosophical concept looks at the intentions and attitudes of the speaker and the reception of the speaker to the audience. In the case of human trafficking, the preceding coercive imperative is an absolute necessity for victimization to occur as traffickers, contrary to common belief, rely on manipulative communicative methods rather than violence in order to reify the trafficking business. Moreover, before any form of structural exploitation takes place, traffickers must utilize some form of communication in order to begin the coercion process. Traffickers cast a wide net when recruiting and do not limit themselves to a particular demographic or populace. However, in all cases of trafficking save for outright kidnapping, communicative acts of deception, blackmail or the like are the initial coercive methods utilized by traffickers (Baldwin, Fehrenbacher, Eisenman, 2015). These methods of coercion are more communicative than forms of physical coercion (Baldwin et al., 2015). Literally, “phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena’: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience” (Stanford encyclopedia, 2022). Stanley Deetz’ definition of consciousness exists as “not a mental psychological construct, but rather the very direction, intention or mode of doing in the world” (Deetz, 1973, pp. 42). Moreover, a central guiding principle of phenomenology is the intentionality of the speaker. Jean Paul Sartre in 1939 provides a robust overview of intentionality and invokes the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl stating that “This necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself is what Husserl calls ‘intentionality’ (Sartre, 1970, pp. 3-4). Intentionality as a concept is

fundamentally connected to Heidegger's *dasein* or being in the world as intentionality refers to the underlying motivations by which an entity enacts their *dasein*. In particular, when speaking to language, intentionality on the part of the speaker proves a central guiding principle of phenomenology.

A stark manipulation of the consciousness of their targets remains the primary imperative of the traffickers before the commencement of abusive violence against the trafficked person (Baldwin et al., 2015). This type of 'epistemic violence' which precedes actual physical harm is of interest to the study (Chapman-Schmidt 2019; Dugassa, 2008). The phenomenological perspective regarding human trafficking carries weight due to the way human trafficking affects a person's individual identity. The weight of sexual abuse carries far beyond the violent act committed. Rather, the preeminent harm is the psychological damage that results after the act is long past. According to human trafficking statistics, trafficking rarely involves forced methods of coercion such as kidnapping, blackmail or the like. Although instances of forced apprehension occur, they exist in the minority when compared to communicative manipulation as the primary method of recruitment (Ravi et al., 2007). The central tenets of phenomenology concern experience as it is perceived by the object and the way experience is transmitted across different channels excluding the experience obtained by each individual's ontology. The Stanford Encyclopedia provides these central tenets as according to Husserl, Sartre, Merlot-Ponte, and Heidegger. "The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions" (Zalta, 2012). The

idea of intentionality exists for phenomenologists to differentiate themselves from classic philosophical leanings. Instead of viewing an object perceived outside of the realm of consciousness, intentionality showcases that objects do not exist outside of the experience. Rather, observable objects become part of the conscious experience of the human mind rather than as something separate. In regard to human trafficking, the concept of intentionality carries critical weight when considering the initial interaction between the traffickers and their potential victims.

### **Interpretive Phenomenology and Human Trafficking**

The relationship between human trafficking and interpretive phenomenology concerns the importance of victim identification as a practice as well as utilizing a more in depth understanding of the experiences of those being trafficked to glean knowledge about the individualized effect of trafficking. Human trafficking and IPA have a sparse but significant history that will be covered in this section of the literature review. McKnight (2022) details an interpretive phenomenological analysis of migrant workers who have been trafficked and their trafficking experience. McKnight's (2022) study detailed the perspectives of law enforcement and their experience when dealing with human trafficking. Mcknight's (2022) identified issues with the ability of law enforcement to identify victims of human trafficking and how they should proceed. The importance of this phenomenological analysis with regards to human trafficking concerns the experience of both victims and law enforcement such that more effective victim identification can be achieved (p. 19).

McKnight (2022) provides an overview of ontology and constructivism and further justifies the importance of interpretive phenomenology as a method. Ontology can

be defined as “the philosophy of existence and assumptions and beliefs about the nature of being and existence” (McKnight, 2022, p. 20). McKnight’s (2022) analysis of ontology proves pertinent to this analysis of coercive methods of trafficking because ultimately the research is exploring the perceptions, opinions and lived experiential world of those being trafficked (McKnight, 2022; Picione, 2015; Reid et al., 2005). Moreover, McKnight’s study detailed the experiential world in all the key areas of human trafficking, including recruitment, transportation, and the actual exploitative process of human trafficking (McKnight, 2022, pp. 2-15). Ontology refers to the study of forms of being or state of being. With regards to human trafficking, understanding of the effect that coercion utilized by traffickers involves a distinct understanding of an individual’s ontology. If their ontology is not affected according to the methods utilized by the traffickers, then there is no way that coercion and recruitment can take place. This idea of ontology stems from the broader idea of epistemological violence.

Regarding sex trafficking, McKnight (2022) outlines the three categories of sex trafficked people that exist in the current trafficking world. The first group consists of those who know they will be doing some type of sex work out of their own free will but find that upon arrival to their destination, they have been deceived and are at the mercy of their trafficker. The second group consists of those who have been lured to their destination under false pretenses, and the third and rarest category consists of those who have been kidnapped or abducted (p. 7). The primary purpose of this paper is not to resolve current sociological and political debates within the academy about human trafficking. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the existing literature by creating an understanding of the individuals affected by trafficking. The way that this



thesis seeks to understand individuals and their relationship to trafficking through their lived experiential world is through interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Sukach et al. (2018) concerns human trafficking and interpretive phenomenology with a focus on the manner in which human trafficking impacts female participants' lived experience. Their two primary research questions were: "What are the experiences of female survivors of sexual human trafficking within the industry?" and "How do survivors make sense of those experiences?" (p. 1422). Sukatch et al. (2018) performs an interpretive phenomenological analysis with 15 female participants and utilizes a semi-structured interview guide for their inquiry (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). A phenomenological thematic analysis was performed after interviews were transcribed and coded for by multiple team members for the purposes of intercoder reliability (Sukatch et al., 2018). The study provides a deep meditation on the trauma experienced by female sex trafficking victims, emphasizing the notion of traumatic experiences. Sukatch et al. (2018) elaborate on this point stating that "Typically, traumatic experiences start immediately, and victims are introduced to the industry through abuse such as gang rapes, threat(s), and beatings to break them in and gain power and control (O'Brien, Hayes, Carpenter, 2013). Victims find themselves trapped or are physically limited to specific areas (Vindhya & Dev, 2011) and are forced to provide sexual services" (Sukatch et al., 2018). The exploitation which occurs for these participants seems relatively universal and requires a sense of urgency on the part of the trafficker to quickly traumatize and gain control over their victims. In analyzing the trauma associated with trafficking, the psychological and ontological leanings of the perpetrators can be brought to light.

When speaking in terms of ontology, the traffickers' ontology can best be defined as the circumstances and state of existence which cause them to dehumanize and exploit others for profit (Teo, 2010; Sukatch et al., 2018, pp. 1424). Traffickers' main incentive in participating in the business of enslavement is to ensure profit above all else. In order to ensure profit, their rationale, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or other demographic leanings, is to gain absolute control over their victims. From the trafficker's perspective, people exist as their primary product and mode of profit (Sukatch et al., 2018, pp. 1424). The psychological implications of human trafficking showcase both the experiential trauma and exploitation undergone by the participants but at the same time also showcases the inherent psychology of the trafficker, their motivations, and overall ontological leanings which has pushed them to commit these exploitative acts (Sukatch et al., 2018). The exploitative process of human trafficking targets the lived experiences of prospective victims. Moreover, when looking at phenomenology through the lens of *dasein* or 'being in the world' then both individualized epistemic qualities such as psychology as well as how psychological leanings manifest as 'being in the world' serve in highlighting what it is like to be trafficked. Interpretive phenomenology as a concept provides a certain utility in understanding the lived experiences of trafficked people because it does not stop short of analyzing group psychology. Instead, in addition to considering a victims' psychology, interpretive phenomenology attempts to codify the sum total of a person's lived experience.

Phenomenology exists primarily as a qualitative approach which looks intently at the lived experiences of the participants as well as each participants' own sense of meaning attached to such experiences (Sukatch et al., 2018). Interpretive phenomenology

also implies that people are “self-interpreting beings” meaning that people actively try to make sense of the world around them and model their behavior and attitudes based on their subjective interpretation of externalities (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). My primary task in an analysis like this is to ensure the authenticity and consistency of the experiences of the participants. Moreover, the researcher engages in what is known as a ‘double hermeneutic’ wherein the participant makes sense of their experiences and communicates that to the researcher who then makes their own interpretations (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Sukatch et al., 2018). To ensure the validity and maintenance of this experience a social constructivist epistemological framework was maintained throughout the course of the research study. A social constructivist framework insinuates a need to recognize the cultural, ideological, and personal experiences and beliefs which influence the researchers’ understanding of the data itself. Through this ‘epistemological lens’ researchers and participants both play a part in determining the meaning of whatever phenomenon is being studied, in this case, human trafficking (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014; Sukatch et al., 2018).

Through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, more distinct delineation of the ontologies of the targets can be ascertained. An understanding of the communicative motivations of the traffickers can be better achieved through knowledge of the intentionality of the trafficker’s attempts to define their victims' lived experience. In essence, the intentionality of the trafficker refers to the willingness and ability to coerce victims into thinking that trafficking is the best option for them (Deetz, 1975). The issue of trafficking as it pertains to phenomenology concerns the experience of the victims during the initial coercion process as well as during trafficking and after. However, it

proves important to distinguish the root cause of the communicative manipulation utilized to coerce trafficked people. Previous phenomenological studies of human trafficking interrogate presuppositions for the cause of human trafficking and remakes them into distinct themes analyzed as primary causes for human trafficking in the phenomenological sense. For example, Tsai et al. speak to how “Six themes were identified: appreciation for education and provision for basic needs; importance of consistent caregiving and emotional support; lacking freedom and feeling trapped by rules; violence in the shelter; staff difficulties managing boys’ behavior and responding to violence; and the impact of financial resources on shelter experiences” (Tsai, Lim, Nhanh, 2022, p. 17). The interpretive phenomenological approach utilized in this case identifies many competing and distinct themes (including the classic resource misallocation presupposition) and delineates these themes within the same study. The analysis portion consists of transcribed and coded interviews from activists in the field of human trafficking. They give their important perspectives on trafficking, coercion, the challenges facing activists as well as a delineation of the socio-political realities facing prospective victims of trafficking.

Overall, the limited understanding in the published research about human trafficking and the limited reliability of research on sex trafficking combine to mean there is a need for more research, especially research that extends understandings about trafficking as an experiential phenomenon (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Sukatch et al., 2014). Given this, the research reported here aimed to contribute to understandings about trafficking by providing insight into the experiences and understandings of those directly and actively engaged in combating trafficking. The primary purpose of this research was

to explore the lived experiences of activists working in the field of trafficking and to illuminate understandings about the coercive aspects of recruitment, notably on the focus of traffickers' coercive actions and the circumstantial and experiential realities which facilitate trafficking recruitment. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used because this approach emphasizes lived experiences, hence it was particularly suitable for gaining an unbiased understanding of activists' perspectives on trafficking and their understandings about the experiences of being trafficked. As such, interpretive phenomenology was used to gain a fuller micro understanding of what it is like to be trafficked given the holistic exploitative nature of trafficking.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), semi structured interviews were conducted with six participants through the online video conference platform Zoom. An interview guide consisting of 13 questions was used to facilitate a conversational interview following the stipulations of IPA. The interviews were transcribed, and the data analyzed using a thematic analysis. Initial creation of codes was achieved through Otter.ai. After a manual coding of the transcriptions by the researcher, the transcripts were again coded through NVivo Software for the purposes of ensuring reliability. Intercoder reliability exists as one of the main challenges to doing a thematic content analysis in this style, however, the usage of software such as NVivo assuages statistical reliability issues (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, 2016).

#### **Participants**

Six people who work as activists in the field of sex trafficking were recruited to participate through a networking approach. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling through a secondary source. The six people interviewed are identified by numbers and the information provided is limited to retain confidentiality. Participants worked in a variety of roles and represented a range of organizations as they came from settings and activities that crossed and intersected academic, therapeutic, advocacy, and missionary contexts. One participant was a former trafficked person who now works as an anti-trafficking activist working with trafficked people in a variety of capacities. Five of the participants worked in Florida, and one in Arizona.

## Interview Design

To understand the coercive effect of trafficking, the experiences of those being trafficked, as well as the sociopolitical realities surrounding trafficking, the interviews were semi-structured in nature. In a phenomenological analysis, there is a distinct need to try to understand the experiences of those being trafficked through a conversational style interview (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). When an interview is ‘semi-structured’ this indicates that the interview does not follow hard and fast guidelines and functions more like a conversation (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006; McIntosh and Morse, 2015). The conversational interview style implies that the guide exists as just that, a guide and diverging lines of inquiry can be pursued if the inquiry is pertinent to the experience of the participant in the study and those that they are describing (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). This is all according to the stipulations laid out by interpretive phenomenological analysis.

The interview guide consisted of different categories of questions designed for particular interviewees. Starting off, the interview guide asks for basic demographic data as well as questions about employment and educational background. For case workers and activists working in the field of trafficking, questions such as “Do you have any insight to share on the relationship between a trafficked person and their captor?” and “Do you have any insight on the ways in which traffickers coerce their victims?” When dealing with the singular participant who survived human trafficking, questions were more related to their personal experience with trafficking as well as activist perspectives. For example, “In your experience, how would you describe the ways/methods traffickers used to manage, persuade and/or coerce their targets?” and “What was a particularly

effective strategy? And why?” were asked. In closing, participants were asked to share any outstanding thoughts, anecdotes, or important data points that they feel I might have missed during the course of my questioning.

Phenomenology exists primarily as a qualitative approach which looks intently at the lived experiences of the participants as well as each participants own sense of meaning attached to such experiences (Sukatch et al., 2018). Interpretive phenomenology also implies that people are “self-interpreting beings” meaning that people actively try to make sense of the world around them and model their behavior and attitudes based on their subjective interpretation of externalities (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). The researchers’ primary task in an analysis like this is to ensure the authenticity and consistency of the experiences of the participants. Moreover, the researcher engages in what is known as a ‘double hermeneutic’ wherein the participant makes sense of their experiences and communicates that to the researcher who then makes their own interpretations (Sukatch et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). In order to ensure the validity and maintenance of this experience a social constructivist epistemological framework is maintained throughout the course of the research study. A social constructivist framework insinuates a need to recognize the cultural, ideological, and personal experiences and beliefs which influence the researchers’ understanding of the data itself. Through this ‘epistemological lens’ researchers and participants both play essential roles in determining the meaning of whatever phenomenon is being studied, in this case, human trafficking.



## **Procedure**

The interviews were all conducted virtually utilizing Zoom. The interviews were semi-structured to enable the topic to be explored according to the participants' experiences and responses once the initial questions were asked. The initial questions were used to gather basic information while also aimed at giving the interviewee a chance to relax and build rapport with the interviewer. The first part of the interview was focused on building a relationship with participants and making sure they were comfortable. Participants were asked not to use actual names, and reminded any identifying content would be removed during transcription. The first question is to allow participants to start talking and define themselves in their own terms. It should also allow the distinction between survivors and those employed in the field of trafficking.

The interviews were transcribed utilizing Otter.AI software. The transcribed interviews appeared as full text transcriptions. These text transcriptions were then sifted through by the researcher for grammatical, formatting, and other such errors which occur when transcribing audio to text. Any identifying information was also removed at this stage. After the transcriptions of the interview were complete, coding of the interviews themselves was performed through NVivo software. Codes were divided into distinct categories and subcategories and themes were gleaned from the analysis utilizing NVivo.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS

The thematic analysis was undertaken according to the stipulations laid out by interpretive phenomenological analysis. Three main themes were identified. The first theme was basic needs, with two subthemes: intangible basic needs and tangible basic needs. The second theme was socio-political realities, which comprised three subthemes: cultural realities surrounding trafficking, legislative barriers, and the relative discreteness of trafficking. The third theme was the psychological consequences of trafficking, with two subthemes: the psychological effects of human trafficking while in traffic and repairing the mental health damage done to trafficking victims after being in trafficking.

#### **Theme 1: Basic Needs**

Basic needs imply those needs which exist as most essential to the functioning of a human being, when these needs are not being met, they can be exploited by someone offering to fill what has not been given (Streeten, 1984, pp. 973-978). It is necessary to establish the relative fluidity of basic needs as a concept insofar as they vary from person to person. When looking at how traffickers exploit others, an understanding of the idea that basic needs vary depending on each individual's unique circumstances needs to be cultivated and established for this analysis. There exist two subordinate themes which encapsulate basic needs, the first is intangible needs and the second is tangible needs. The participants by and large all speak to how traffickers exploit these basic needs in order to recruit victims. When looking through the data, criteria which encapsulate this idea of basic needs have been delineated throughout each of the interviews and includes both of

these categories. For tangible needs, food, water, shelter, drugs, and medicine are all tangible basic needs which every human being requires. The interviews show that traffickers prey on these tangible basic needs and seek to fill these needs whenever they are not being met. For example, the participant codenamed ID-1 mentions the impact of poverty and how traffickers exploit impoverished populations. The participant codenamed ID-1 spoke on poverty stating that, “The poverty is huge. You know, people who are at an economic disadvantage, broken families, fatherless families. But even it goes beyond that.” The participant codenamed ID-3 further spoke to poverty and references the concentration of wealth as part of the exploitative process of trafficking.

It's because we've impoverished and underserved these communities, right? It's the concentration of power and wealth within a certain group and the things they do to make sure other groups can't come take it, basically.

The participant codenamed ID-2 provides an even more specific look and references specific basic needs that traffickers exploit, “It starts with basic needs, so food, shelter, clothing, love safety, that's what everybody needs. And those are the holes that traffickers fill for their victims.”

Basic needs by nature are tangible, physical needs which encapsulate those things most necessary for human survival. The participants delineate that traffickers tend to exploit basic needs before they move on to other methods of recruitment and exploitation.

For *intangible basic needs*, these needs encapsulate those which are not physical in nature. Emotional and psychological qualities like abuse, abandonment issues, and validation all fall under intangible needs being exploited by traffickers. The manner in which these intangible needs are exploited by traffickers differs widely based on each

individual person. Throughout this thematic analysis, only the most key quotes from each interview will be delineated for each coded theme and subordinate theme. When describing their experiences, the participants each delineated the impact of poverty on victims and their vulnerability to being trafficked. Two of the activists interviewed for this study indicate that the exploitation of vulnerabilities does not stop with tangible physical needs such as food, water, shelter, and drugs. Oftentimes, intangible vulnerabilities such as the need for love and affection or perhaps the escape from an abusive household serve as recruitment and coercion incentives utilized by traffickers. The participants codenamed ID-6 and ID-1 speak to how recruitment methods extend beyond tangible needs into intangible, more abstract needs. ID-6 spoke to how intangible vulnerabilities can originate with any particular socio-economic class of people.

Because I know some who have come out of very wealthy families. And I think it just all boils down to vulnerabilities, whether it's you're in poverty, or whether you're not in poverty, we all have vulnerabilities. And many that I know, have just said, well, he was the only one that told me I was pretty, or he was the only one that told me, he was proud of me. My parents never told me they were proud of me. But he told me he was proud of me. So that's a vulnerability. So, it's so multifaceted. There are so many layers, it's really hard to say, but I think when you boil it all down, I like to explain my definition of human trafficking is the business of the exploitation of vulnerabilities for another person's gain. So, I think that kind of all it's about the vulnerabilities, whether rich or poor

From an academic perspective, the participant codenamed ID-4 spoke further to phenomena involving intangible vulnerabilities such as self-esteem and the like.

And then I would say, another vulnerability that's rampant is a self-esteem issue, and all the recruiting that's able to go on social media. So, love, acceptance, you know, yeah. Now, there's a Hierarchy of Needs over there.

These participants delineate that the idea of basic needs does not merely encapsulate tangible or physical human necessities, but also encapsulate intangible emotional needs such as the need for love, pride, and acceptance into a like-minded group. Traffickers can portray themselves as the person or people to grant these essential needs to other beings and as such is a key method of exploitation. There exists an understanding across all participants that poverty tends to be one of the main driving factors around human trafficking. When looking at poverty in the context of individualized experience it is paramount to understand that the nature of poverty affects an individual's psychology and causes them to seek essential needs outside their immediate vicinity.

One of the ways that the essential needs lacking in an impoverished state is met is through human trafficking and sex trafficking in particular. Traffickers will often make false promises of wealth, security, and financial stability in order to coerce victims to go with them to whatever destination might exist. The participants all delineate that trafficking exists as a way to exploit what people need in order to bend their reality into one of servitude and bondage. The divvying up of basic needs between the abstract concepts of intangible and tangible needs was done because the participants drew a clear line between physical needs such as food, water and shelter and intangible needs such as love, validation, and the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities at large.

## **Theme 2: Socio-Political Realities**

The second broad theme that participants delineate are the effect of the socio-political realities surrounding the field of human trafficking and how that impacts victim identification, trafficking recruitment, and the methods of coercion that traffickers utilize. There exist three subordinate themes under this broad theme of socio-political realities. The first sub theme is that of legislative barriers, the second sub theme is that of cultural perceptions of human trafficking and the third sub theme is the discretion and recruitment methods as it relates to socio political realities.

The first sub theme being analyzed is legislative barriers. When speaking to legislative barriers, across the board, participants indicate that there exist structural issues with legislative design for trafficking in the United States. Three participants spoke to the idea of legislative barriers and emphasized how the current legislation surrounding human trafficking proves insufficient and negatively impacts potential victims. The participants known as ID-4, ID-2, and ID-1 all speak to the legislative barriers impacting trafficking. ID-2 spoke to how legislative inaction comes due to complacency on part of both lawmakers and constituencies.

People are not motivated to make new laws, we have tried to pass a legislature here in the state of Florida, raising that fine, there's a \$5,000 John fee in the state of Florida. Very few people ever get that it gets laid out and it disappears. And that money is supposed to go directly to survivors to say films to services.

The participant codenamed ID-4 spoke to how trafficking as a concept was not considered a public health concern by official agencies until recently.

It wasn't until the mid-90s that the CDC came in and said this is a public health concern really. And we need to establish similar definitions and ways we measure it. So, if we're all doing it that way, we get a better idea of its true prevalence.

Well, we're just at that stage right now with human trafficking, where people are going, hey, the Polaris data is not that accurate. Yeah. And we need better ways.

We need more accurate measures.

Moreover, the participant codenamed ID-1 spoke to how current legislation and merely making trafficking illegal proves insufficient in terms of providing adequate victim services.

Great, we made it illegal, but we're very focused on victim services. We're also very focused on sex over labor because it plays in the news better, or the media gets it. Yeah. Yeah. And we don't, and we don't pay attention to labor, because we see labor as communities of color and migrant and Hispanic and Latina

This spoke to the issues of race present within the realm of human trafficking. Within the field of human trafficking, false cultural perceptions of who is trafficked, namely the poster child of trafficked people being often white, kidnapped, women in bondage.

Moreover, the focus of sex trafficking over labor trafficking within the broad field of trafficking serves to highlight the glamourization of sex as a concept according to participants. In essence, this participant spoke to how legislative methods of combating trafficking prove insufficient, there must be a clear picture of what trafficking looks like in the mainstream.

The participant known as ID-2 further elaborates stating that despite the current laws on human trafficking, the issue is getting worse, and traffickers have no disincentive to continue recruiting new people into the life.

It's gotten worse every year since I've been in a field where our laws are insufficient, people don't get punished. Traffickers get away with it because they are so well insulated. And because the laws are insufficient. There's a loophole in the law that allows you to charge somebody with a lesser crime. And so, traffickers get away with things because they play out. Because our system is overcrowded with criminals in general. Yes, yeah. And so there's all those things at play, and then we're putting a bandage on the people who have been trafficked. We're not doing great at services because there's just not enough safe homes that are great for temporary fixes.

Each of the participants represented in these transcribed excerpts speak to how the legislative barriers involved in human trafficking make the issue worse for victims because of how little consequence and risk exists for those involved in the recruitment and trafficking process. Moreover, participants' gripes with the legislation involving human trafficking in the United States echoes much of the literature review wherein scholars have delineated that the legislative language is far from standardized across the board. Differences in state legislation on human trafficking, federal lack of political will to standardize a definition of human trafficking as well as the relative difficulty of prosecution of traffickers facilitate the recruitment of victims. The reason that this facilitates recruitment is because lack of standardized legislation allows traffickers to operate discreetly and under the radar, thus making them incur little to no risk when



recruiting victims. The participants' perception is that if there was significantly more risk to recruit, then trafficking would certainly see a decline. The second subordinate theme known as cultural perceptions of human trafficking has to do with the culture surrounding human trafficking and how the mainstream perception of human trafficking creates issues with victim identification. When speaking to victim identification, the participants delineate that the cultural perception of trafficking in the mainstream has created a false or inaccurate perception of whom trafficking affects on a holistic level. As such, participants emphasize that recruitment efforts by traffickers have been bolstered by a few cultural phenomena surrounding human trafficking. First is the perception of gender and sex trafficking and second is the portrayal of largely white demographics of trafficking in mainstream media. Four participants spoke to the cultural realities surrounding human trafficking. The first participant codenamed ID-4 spoke to how the cultural media representations of trafficking prove detrimental to the cause of preventing trafficking.

The image of sex trafficking is always the little blonde girl. You know, that's why versus we know, the majority of victims being trafficked don't necessarily fit that image, right. But we still use it because it gets people with money to care to make donations to then run victim services. While we're doing all that we're trying to address it in the courts

The participant codenamed ID-1 further spoke to the gendered dynamics involved in the trafficking realm.

You know, why is it for generations and decades, that a male who brags on you know, basically being reared, promiscuous is celebrating it? Wherever a female does, she's considered loose, and all the other derogatory? Yeah, yeah. And so that same concept comes into this now, but it's ironic, because then it's flipped to where now everybody who doesn't have a problem with calling maybe somebody some derogatory names is now Oh, she's a victim. Well, what about his, you know, the boys that are trafficked? You know, are they victims? Well, they may have maybe chose it.

ID-1 goes on to speak to the manner in which boys and men are perceived when it comes down to trafficking. He further illuminates how trafficking can particularly affect those in marginalized or LGBTQ communities.

They're absolutely not. And it's very fascinating to me, this may be more anecdotal, because we don't have a lot of data on it. And I'm thankful, thank you for doing what you're doing. Because what we need is, even in the LGBTQ plus community, what I've spoken there, you know, we have partners, we, you know, just very involved in embracing that community. But even in that community, it's almost like the boys who are exploited or, you know, male sex workers are looked at, almost solely, even in that, again, from that lens of that population as volunteering and part you know, participation and being permitted. Us, which is very fascinating to me. And yet sad, because how can a 12-year-old boy just because he identifies as gay, bi, or trans, now be a participant because they're

discovering sexual freedom. versus, you know, if it was a heterosexual, you know, female it'd be considered a victim.

The participant codenamed ID-3 works exclusively with the Navajo nation and focuses on indigenous populations and sex trafficking involving them. He spoke to the differences in trafficking between them and in mainstream America.

Okay, and so grandfather, molests granddaughter, well, great grandfather didn't molest granddaughter, because grandfather's evil grandfather molested granddaughter because things are out of balance. Right. And if things were better, he would never have done that. You know, and that's very common throughout Native America.

ID-1 caps off this particular subtheme by speaking further to the hypersexual culture of America and how it glorifies and glamorizes trafficking.

Right. I think, you know, in our hypersexual culture, I think, you know, pimps are still glorified in a lot of ways. And I think that's part of it, certainly, for the profit, I think is the most, you know, is the highest way, but I think there's some kind of glorification that a pimp might feel, or a trafficker might feel that, hey, man, I'm doing this I'm making all this money.

The first participant spoke to the mainstream cultural perception of human trafficking and how although human trafficking tends to disproportionately affect people of color, most media images, posters, and news stories focus on white bodies being trafficked. The second transcription speaks to the perception of gender within the cultural milieu of trafficking and how although boys are being trafficked at increasingly high rates, they are not perceived as victims based on their gender. The third participant is an activist within

the Navajo nation in Arizona. In the Navajo nation, a lot of the trafficking which takes place is familial and as such, the cultural milieu surrounding trafficking in the Navajo nation is distinct from how it takes place in other areas of the United States. The final participant spoke to how the glorification of pimp culture creates a glamourized perception of trafficking in the mainstream, where the social status and wealth of traffickers is emphasized over their abusive and exploitative tendencies. According to the participants, the perception is that men and boys being trafficked are perceived as having more strength, will and choice such that they can get out if they so choose. ID-1 spoke to these issues and states that,

But even in that community, it's almost like the boys who are exploited or, you know, male sex workers are looked at, almost solely, even in that, again, from that lens of that population as volunteering and part you know, participation and being promiscuous. Us, which is very fascinating to me. And yet sad, because how can a 12-year-old boy just because he identifies as gay, bi, or trans, now be a participant because they're discovering sexual freedom. versus, you know, if it was a heterosexual, you know, female it'd be considered a victim.

This sub theme showcases differences between separate cultures and how they deal with trafficking as well as how perceptions of gender normativity and victim identification lead to issues with the identification of trafficking victims. This difficulty in identification leads to easier recruitment on the part of the traffickers because of the relative discretion and low risk incurred by them when recruiting. The next subtheme of discretion and recruitment methods spoke to how traffickers recruit victims, stay under the radar, and reify the trafficking business.

The third and final sub theme identified in this broad theme of sociopolitical realities is that of Discretion and Recruitment Methods. The participants across the board spoke to how human trafficking exists as a fundamentally disjunct institution wherein the goings on of the abuse suffered by the victims happen behind closed doors. The importance of deceit for the business of trafficking cannot be understated due to the violent and nonreciprocal nature of the act. By nonreciprocal, this paper means that trafficking as a practice involves the inherent violent harm of another being for the purposes of profit. As such, willing submission of people into slavery is not going to happen nor is an institutionalized legal version in the modern age in most established nations. Oftentimes, victims of trafficking will not be outright lied to about the sexual acts they are going to perform. Rather, they will rather be lied to about the degree of frequency of sexual acts, the relative safety of their shelter as well as how they will be compensated for these acts. Once potential victims reach their destination under the guise of false promises it proves too late as traffickers already have them under their control and will not let them go unless an unrealistic or impossible debt has been paid. The result of this is indefinite bondage to the person to whom the debt is owed. There were three participants which spoke to the specific recruitment methods utilized by traffickers. They are, in order of participants, ID-1, ID-3 and ID-4.

ID-1 delineated the social media effects and how trafficking is reified through usage of social media.

So, it's going to be through, you know, all the social media that we use, mainly, you know, the dating sites. On only fans, it can be everything that's used, you know, where there's good, there's bad, so they're just using everything to connect

with somebody, you're pretty you should do this, you know, I want to be your boyfriend.

The next participant codenamed ID-3 spoke to the difference between types of traffickers speaking to the exchange of essential goods such as drugs as well as survival sex as important concepts to understand coercion and trafficking.

And, and there's the classic like, you know, boyfriend, not, not quite Romeo, but, you know, kind of, kind of in that world where we're, you know, if they both, especially if they're drug users, right, if they're drug users, you know, trading, trading sex for drugs, you know, trading sex for money trading sex for this, you know, since there's so much poverty, and the trafficker in that case, let's presume the boyfriend is, is he's in just as much poverty. So, he's kind of using his girlfriend, she's doing the survival sex thing, and they're both benefiting from it.

The academic codenamed ID-4 spoke further to the social media issues surrounding trafficking.

But there's a lot of tactics now cyber, you know, using social media. And because you can do a lot of subtle things. And you have some distance to that. And it's easier for traffickers to kind of cover their tracks so to speak. If they get reported because they can pretend even online to be someone or something that they're not, they can use, you know, texting, phones, media, and many parents don't monitor those things. Even in homes where parents are active, they're not always monitoring that as closely.

These two participants speak to two different recruitment methods primarily utilized by traffickers. ID-1 spoke to how online social media platforms, especially sex cam

platforms such as OnlyFans exist as a breeding ground for the recruitment of new victims. The reason for this has to do with the broad reach of social media and the abilities of traffickers to create messages which target particular vulnerabilities. For example, the participant codenamed ID-4 states that

It depends on each individual. I've spoken to traffickers who sent out 500, good morning, beautiful texts, on Facebook, social media, Instagram, whatever. And then whoever responded is who they targeted. So, they cast a very wide net.

The reach of social media and the rise of sex related social media platforms such as OnlyFans, Fansly and FanHouse have created new avenues of recruitment for traffickers that were not available before the turn of the 21st century. The participants, by and large, speak to how social media exists as the primary recruitment tools of traffickers, but it is important to state that this does not mean that more traditional forms of recruitment do not take place.

### **Theme 3: The Psychological Effects of Human Trafficking**

The final broad theme covered within this analysis is the psychological effects of human trafficking, both in recruitment and in the process of being trafficked. The psychological effects of human trafficking, both in the coercion process and the exploitative process of being in traffic have wide reaching and long-lasting effects on the victims. Participants speak to the psychological effects of human trafficking from two main perspectives which serve as subthemes. First, participants speak to the psychological consequences of being in the process of trafficking, where most of the exploitation takes place. Second, they speak to victim services and activist organizations

doing their part to protect and attempt to repair the mental health damage done to trafficking victims.

When looking at the first subtheme, the process of being in traffic, there exist four aspects that the participant codenamed ID-1 spoke to with regards to this process, “First is recruitment, second is grooming, the third is immersion and the fourth and final stage is being in traffic” These recruitment methods have an indelible effect on the victims’ psychology and allow for their manipulation and indoctrination into the life of trafficking according to participants. Moreover, the recruitment process itself reveals information about the intrinsic motivations of traffickers according to participants. For example, the participant codenamed ID-1 spoke to how trafficking is fundamentally motivated by greed. ID-1 spoke to how traffickers’ motivations come down to greed and the need for profit above all else. Moreover, he emphasizes that trafficking is primarily a business wherein the end of the exploitation is to make money.

So the motive is really greed. So we go back to maybe, yes, we looked at the motivation of drug trafficking. Why do cartels exist, for example? Or why do you maybe maybe those who are trafficking weapons, right, it goes back to greed, money. And so there, it's very lucrative. And so, I think the motivation or the root of it, Steven is greed. And there's, now they have a customer, right? So, it's the human trafficking triangle. So, see the triangle, and you see the victim, the trafficker, and the buyer.

Traffickers themselves, according to participants, exploit other people for the purposes of greed and profit. The trafficking field exists as a lucrative business wherein the primary goal for most people involved in the recruitment process is profit above all else.



Traffickers will utilize whatever means necessary in order to garner profit and recruit new victims. Psychologically, these vulnerabilities are exploited in order to make it clear in the victim's mind that they are under the recruiter's control. ID-1 elaborates on this idea by comparing the life of being a trafficker to being in a cult or organized crime group.

Right. It is when they feel like they're stuck. So they are trapped. And that is where it is hard because the brainwashing that psychological or coercion manipulation, is like almost being in a cult of you don't everybody ever in a cult, where they are just brainwashed. And they, you know, it's almost like, instead of God wants me to do this, or God said, it is, you know, my boyfriend or my daddy.

According to ID-1, Traffickers attempt to cut off all other forms of solace and resources for their victims and attempt to make it so that the trafficker is their only recourse for their basic physical and psychological needs. The primary method that traffickers do this is through the establishment of loyalty and submission on part of the people they are recruiting. A rebellious trafficked populace proves difficult to control and make profit with. As such, traffickers seek to exploit vulnerabilities so that they can establish loyalty and submission on the part of trafficked people. Moreover, traffickers establish a cult of personality around them such that their victims show submission and loyalty to their captors. The brainwashing that goes on within a trafficking context is to ensure low rates of rebellion and high rates of retention among trafficked people. Moreover, human beings are a non-disposable and widely available "product" for traffickers to exploit because of how many vulnerable populations exist. The participant codenamed ID-3 emphasizes that,

You can explain it like this. If you sell a bag of cocaine, you sell it one time the person uses it, that bag is gone forever, right? If you sell to a person, you can sell to the same person 5, 10, 15 times a day. And so, there is a lot more money to be made when you sell a person and people are easy to get, we have broken vulnerable people all over people in poverty.

The relative indispensableness of human beings as well as their wide availability allow for the psychological manipulation and brainwashing that goes on during the process of trafficking. A participant, codenamed ID-2, is a former survivor of human trafficking and had been traffickers since their teen years. She spoke firsthand about the psychological manipulation of trafficked victims and how she was personally manipulated by her trafficker into the life of exploitation. ID-2 spoke to how traffickers manipulate victims psychologically in order to recruit and indoctrinate them.

They flip the script and then it becomes, well, we owe this person over here for something because they don't just throw you out in the streets that you'd run away, right? So, it starts very subtly. We owe this person over here. for something, so we have to do something to pay him back. So, you are going to have to go do this. And they do that. But at the same time, they're telling you, they love you. They're telling you; they're giving you gifts, they're pulling you back in, they're telling you, nobody else will have you.

ID-2 spoke to the issues involved in the relationship between traffickers and their victims. They inspire loyalty by providing both intangible and tangible needs. ID-2 also implies based on the script the implementation of debt building for new recruits into trafficking, another key method of inspiring loyalty and submission on part of the trafficked person.

From these subthemes, a few important concepts were gleaned from the participants' insights. First and foremost are the relative motivations of those trafficking other humans and how they are motivated by greed above all else. Also, there is the idea that joining into the life of human trafficking is akin to joining a cult. Secondly, the data illuminates that because people prove difficult commodities to replace and are indispensable, the psychological manipulation and brainwashing of victims is of the utmost priority for sex traffickers. Thirdly, this sub theme showcases how victims of sex trafficking are often psychologically and financially manipulated by their captors in order to inspire loyalty and submission from their victims.

The second subtheme encapsulates the process involved in protecting and attempting to repair both the mental and physical damage done to trafficking victims. As mentioned above, all of the participants speak to how traditional forms of recourse for victims such as law enforcement and legislation prove inadequate in helping traffickers reenter mainstream society. As the legislation and government funded programs prove insufficient, many of the activists emphasize the need for organizations to focus on victims' services. Participants emphasize that the current state of victim services for formerly trafficked people prove inadequate in repairing the physical and mental harm done unto them. The participant codenamed ID-2 emphasizes that current forms of care for people recently getting out of the life of trafficking prove insufficient.

Taking a person away from their community, working on them for two years and then putting them back in the same spot doesn't help. They're great for those two years when you put them back in the same spot. All those old things came back, and we didn't prepare them properly to live in that world again. So, what you

really have to do is learn how to treat them while they're in that world. Because they're going to live where they want to live, they're going to live where their family is where they feel comfortable, where they have people who they feel similar to. And so, you have to treat them and teach them how to survive outside of trafficking,

The participants emphasize that short term care for human trafficking is not sufficient in terms of treating the long-term effects of trauma gained from it. This is because people involved in trafficking often have to be eased back into normal life and cannot reenter into society without counseling and guidance on how to live. This occurs for several different reasons, but psychologically, this primarily has to do with victims relying on their traffickers for the meeting of basic needs as well as the normalization of physical and sexual abuse which has no longer become their daily way of living. These drastic changes in a person's psychology when they enter the life of trafficking prove difficult to undo and as such there needs to be more robust care given to those being trafficked both in terms of the quality of care, but the longevity of the care.

The primary aim of this study was to understand the activist perspectives on trafficking. Through utilization of interpretive phenomenology, interviews were transcribed and coded for important themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes illuminated were uncovered through usage of interpretive phenomenology and the stipulations set out by this method. The method dictates that the researcher attempts to uncover the experiential lifeworld of the participants in the study (Reid et al., 2005). Given human trafficking's wholly exploitative process and this study's particular emphasis on coercion, the stipulations of interpretive phenomenology proved suitable for

uncovering what it is like to be trafficked. The themes and subthemes in this findings section best illustrate the activists' perspectives on trafficking as well as delineate their understanding on what it is like to be trafficked. The key utility of utilizing interpretive phenomenology to uncover these themes is that a more micro individualized perspective on trafficking was illuminated.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Human trafficking exists as one of the foremost issues plaguing the international community. The issue is widespread and takes place across all levels of socio-economic class and is a multi-billion dollar underground black market (Tordes, 2023). Moreover, trafficking proves as a fundamentally epistemic issue wherein the lived experience and ontology of prospective targets are exploited by traffickers in order to recruit them into the life. Fundamentally, this thesis argues that human trafficking coercion methods center around the lived experiences of its participants. Namely, that coercive methods utilized by traffickers are tailored for their target demographic. As such, an important part of the utility of performing this interpretive phenomenological analysis is to understand from an individualized perspective what trafficking is actually like for those who are being trafficked.

Further still, the socio-political realities surrounding trafficking as well as the experiences of activists in the field were all delineated through the interviews and analysis and served in highlighting the specific issues affecting these organizations. How organizations are impacted and their subsequent effect on prospective victims of trafficking was also delineated within the analysis. The analysis consists of three distinct themes all comprising the way trafficked people are exploited according to activists. The first theme identified was that of basic needs. Throughout all of the interviews, activists claim that the most common route of exploitation for traffickers is through the providing of basic needs. In the analysis, the two sub themes of intangible and tangible needs were delineated and understanding the differences between the two was of utmost importance

when performing this study. Exploitation of basic needs carries with it important implications when it comes down to the individualized experiences of traffickers.

First, based on the analysis it can be concluded that having access to tangible basic needs reduces risk of recruitment as evidence as shown those not in poverty are less likely to be trafficked (De vries and Cockbain, 2006; Tordes, 2023). However, it is important to understand that this rule is not hard and fast and those who come from higher socio-economic status can still be recruited into the life of trafficking if not properly educated on the topic (De vries and Cockbain, 2006). The participant codenamed ID-1 spoke to this under the subtheme of tangible needs, “Because I know some survivors who have come out of very wealthy families. And I think it just all boils down to vulnerabilities, whether you're in poverty, or whether you're not in poverty, we all have vulnerabilities.” When considering the exploitation of basic needs for the purposes of trafficking then it is important to give nuance to the issue when evaluating the degree of vulnerability for a population.

Indeed, poverty and lack of access to essential resources and tangible needs all leave a person more vulnerable to trafficking by default. However, when these tangible needs such as food, water and shelter are not in play, traffickers can shift recruitment methods and start to look for more intangible vulnerabilities to exploit. These intangible vulnerabilities can be the need for love, the need for companionship or a way to escape an abusive household. This means that even if one is well off and wealthy, their intangible vulnerabilities and ontological leanings can still leave them vulnerable to being trafficked according to the analysis. Trafficking exists as a complex affair, with many different dimensions which influence its implementation in American society. However,

the analysis of the interviews indicates across the board that the exploitation of basic needs is one of the primary methods by which traffickers recruit new victims into the life.

The second theme of sociopolitical realities carries with it more indirect implications and effects on prospective victims of trafficking. Within this second theme the three sub themes of legislative barriers, cultural perceptions of trafficking and the relative discreteness of the field of trafficking were identified. The socio-political realities surrounding trafficking prove an indirect manner in which trafficked people are further exploited. The first subtheme of legislative barriers is echoed both by scholars and participants throughout the analysis. For example, in the analysis the participant codenamed ID-3 delineates the inadequacy of the current legislation involving trafficking in the United States stating that,

Great, we made it illegal, but we're very focused on victim services.

We're also very focused on sex over labor because it plays in the news better, or the media gets it. Yeah. Yeah. And we don't, and we don't pay attention to labor, because we see labor as communities of color and migrant and Hispanic and Latina.

The frustrations delineated by the participant known as ID-3 is echoed by research in the literature review as well wherein scholars have long reported on a lack of standardization of human trafficking legislation at the federal level. Moreover, at the state level, there exists great variance and polarization in terms of the laws regarding trafficking and as such each state in the United States has different definitions of trafficking, methods of prosecution and methods of enforcement and prevention. The lack



of standardization and federalization of trafficking laws impacts victims first and foremost because of how lax laws incentivize traffickers. The lack of standardization of trafficking laws is not lost on those taking part in human trafficking, and there is scholarly consensus that traffickers exploit these legal loose ends in order to recruit victims without much fear of reprisal.

The second sub theme of cultural perceptions of trafficking also impacts victims in a number of different ways. The participants in the analysis known as ID-1 and ID-4 both speak to this phenomenon in the analysis and report two particular mainstream conceptions of trafficking as problematic. First, ID-1, in the analysis spoke to the hypersexual culture that exists within American culture and how that impacts recruitment of trafficking victims,

Right. I think, you know, in our hypersexual culture, I think, you know, pimps are still glorified in a lot of ways. And I think that's part of it, certainly, for the profit, I think is the most, you know, is the highest way, but I think there's some kind of glorification that a pimp might feel, or a trafficker might feel that, hey, man, I'm doing this I'm making all this money

Many of the participants in the analysis speak to hypersexual culture, the prevalence of pornography and the glorification of pimp culture as issues which take away from the seriousness and brutality of trafficking. Indeed, the glorification of sex culture and pimp culture according to activists creates a glamourized and sanitized image of trafficking. The glorification of the wealth and power that comes from living that life exists in stark contrast to the real brutality and violent nature of trafficking. As such, part of the mainstream perception of trafficking consists of this glorification of those perpetrating

the trafficking itself. Secondly, in the analysis, the participant known as ID-3 spoke to how the media portrays trafficking itself stating that,

The image of sex trafficking is always the little blonde girl. You know, that's why versus we know, the majority of victims being trafficked don't necessarily fit that image, right. But we still use it because it gets people with money to care to make donations to then run victim services. While we're doing all that we're trying to address it in the courts

The issue of trafficking in the mainstream conception is twofold again, there exists first and foremost a normalized glorification of pimp culture and also a mainstream misrepresentation of those who are actually being trafficked (Farrell et al., 2012).

The final sub theme of discretion and recruitment methods carries with it important implications for understanding the individualized experience of victims being trafficked and is the core purpose of this master's thesis. Activists across the board indicate that the process of trafficking proves discreet and difficult to identify and prosecute. The recruitment methodologies of traffickers have changed drastically over the past 20 years, especially since the advent of the internet age and social media. The participant codenamed ID-1 spoke to this phenomenon within the analysis.

So, it's going to be through, you know, all the social media that we use, mainly, you know, the dating sites. On OnlyFans, it can be everything that's used, you know, where there's good, there's bad, so they're just using everything to connect with somebody, you're pretty you should do this, you know, I want to be your boyfriend.

The advent of social media has in a sense revolutionized and made easier the methods by which traffickers recruit victims. Moreover, through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and OnlyFans there exists widespread access for traffickers. Across the board, throughout the analysis, participants indicated that traffickers in general send out carefully manicured messages on social media to hundreds if not thousands of participants for the purposes of recruitment. Further still, the mainstream conception that human trafficking occurs mostly through kidnapping or kidnapping alone remains prevalent and difficult to overcome.

The reason for this is twofold, first kidnapping as a concept is sensational news and gains immediate attention from the general populace. Second, the media portrayal of trafficking in the majority of instances involves kidnapping even though scholarly consensus shows that kidnapping is one of the rarest types of recruitment methods for trafficking (Tordes, 2023).

First, the mainstream conception of trafficking remains an issue and campaigns creating more representative images of trafficking for the mainstream populace serve in correcting that perception. For example, instead of creating posters which only represent the ‘blonde girl’ as the participant known as ID-4 indicates, more representative posters indicative of the demographics most vulnerable to trafficking creates a more realistic picture of what trafficking is actually like to mainstream society.

Second, the lack of standardization across legislation has created increased incentives for trafficking and recruitment of new victims into the life. Traffickers know that depending on the state they are in, the trafficking legislation changes and as such they modify their recruitment methods in order to exploit these laws and circumvent

prosecution for human trafficking (Farrel et al., 2012). Scholarly consensus is that federal legislation for human trafficking ought to be standardized according to participants along with the removal of states' power to create their own laws regarding the issues (Farrel et al., 2012). Overall, the socio-political realities facing trafficking activists and victims of trafficking prove essential in understanding the lived experiences of trafficked people. Activists showcase that the legislative barriers, cultural perceptions, and discrete recruitment methods all play a role in creating an environment where trafficking can run rampant. In order to solve these issues, standardized legislation ought to be introduced, mainstream portrayals of trafficking ought to be properly representative and education about social media recruitment methods in particular prove necessary, so people remain safe while using these platforms. Moreover, from a phenomenological perspective activists' understanding about the individualized circumstances and impact on the individual should be emphasized above all else.

The final theme is the psychological effects of trafficking and recruitment and how that impacts victims. Given this is a phenomenological inquiry into trafficking, the third and final theme of the psychological effects of trafficking carries fundamental importance. Trafficking as a concept is epistemically violent, meaning that it otherizes individuals and isolates them psychologically such that they can be recruited into the life of trafficking (Teo, 2010). Throughout the analysis, participants speak to the psychological effects of trafficking and delineate the experience of individuals who are in the process of being trafficked. For example, the participant codenamed ID-1 states that

Right. It's when they feel like they're stuck. So, they're trapped. And that's where it's hard because the brainwashing, that psychological or coercion manipulation, is

almost like being in a cult of you don't everybody ever in a cult, where they're just brainwashed.

The idea that being in a human trafficking ring is akin to being in a cult, gang or organized crime group is echoed by the research on this topic (De vries and Cockbain, 2006; Farrell et al., 2012). As such, the psychological consequences of being trafficked are laid bare as well as the methods by which traffickers force their victims into submission. Traffickers utilize tactics to make their trafficking ring seem akin to the mafia or a cult in order to retain victims voluntarily and reduce instances of rebellion among the populace. Moreover, traffickers isolate and cut off all other forms of refuge for their victims such that the victims can only rely on traffickers to meet their basic needs. According to participants across the board, once the isolation from other sources of refuge takes place, so too does the indoctrination of trafficked people within the life. In essence, it is in the best interest of the trafficker to create a cult of personality around them wherein victims rely on them to meet their basic needs rather than using purely violent means in order to reify the trafficking business.

The second broad subtheme had to do with the psychological consequences and attempts by organizations to repair psychological damage after they have left the life of trafficking. Activists organizations and people interviewed for this study state that the current state of victim's services for people exiting the life of trafficking proves inadequate in terms of their ability to re-enter mainstream society. Participants working directly with victims' services codenamed, all participants speak to this phenomenon and argue for the inadequacy of current victim services. For example, the participant codenamed ID-2 states in the analysis that

Taking a person away from their community, working on them for two years and then putting them back in the same spot doesn't help. They're great for those two years when you put them back in the same spot. All those old things came back, and we didn't prepare them properly to live in that world again.

Trafficked individuals have been normalized into a life of servitude and submission with no compensation and the threat of violence and abuse should they refuse to comply. The type of lifestyle that trafficking victims lead drastically differs from the way that normal everyday people live their lives. Moreover, trafficked people are often in life for many months or even years and as such their conception of what is normal is not aligned with the mainstream population. The participants' indication that current victim services are inaccurate stems from their temporary nature. A person who has been trafficked for many years often gets a maximum of two years of support according to ID-3 before they are expected to re-enter mainstream society. Victims rely on their traffickers for the meeting of basic needs and endure the normalization of physical and sexual abuse as such, the victim services involved need to be robust and based in a therapeutic understanding of trafficking. These drastic changes in a person's psychology when they enter the life of trafficking prove difficult to undo and as such there needs to be more robust care given to those being trafficked both in terms of the quality of care, but most importantly the longevity of the care. Trafficking exists as a wholly exploitative process wherein the

An interpretive phenomenological analysis of trafficking seeks to understand how trafficking influences people on an individual level. "Interpretive phenomenological research specifically seeks to describe, understand, and interpret a phenomenon (Tuohy et al., 2013)—seeking the essence of the lived experience" (Creswell, 2007). Essence from

a phenomenological research perspective is described as the “intuitive structure of meaning, whereby direct examples build a complex understanding of an experience” (Bush, Singh, Kooienga, p. 2). Throughout the analysis, activist perspectives were delineated and evaluated based on what they said about the experiences of those being trafficked as well as the traffickers themselves. Moreover, this paper argues that understanding the experiences of the activists on the matter of coercion as well as the socio-political realities surrounding sex trafficking serve in illuminating how trafficking impacts people on an individual, epistemic level. Moreover, as the literature review demonstrates, scholarly consensus on robust quantitative data regarding trafficking in general remains sparse and requires the addition of experience based qualitative studies to inform its research. There are a few keyways in which this type of analysis is achieved. First, an understanding of the lived experiences of activists working in the field of trafficking was ascertained using interviews.

Furthermore, it is of utmost importance for a phenomenological analysis to provide ‘representations of people’s experience through an unbiased perspective’ (Bush et al., 2019, pp. 3). Part of what makes interpretive phenomenology unique and useful as a method of inquiry is that one of its core tenets is the methodological removal of bias on the part of the researcher. As such, in interpretive phenomenology, hypotheses, research questions and other presumptive metrics of observation are not utilized before the actual analysis takes place. Rather, the fundamental aspect of interpretive phenomenology centers around the experiences illuminating themselves through the data. This data is gathered through conversational interviews wherein the focus is not to answer a

presumed question by the researcher, but instead to understand the '*lifeworld*' of its participants while withholding bias.

Part of the main purpose of studying this topic with regards to human trafficking in particular stems from the relative lack of scholarly consensus on the quantitative data involving human trafficking. For example, De Vries and Cockbain (2023, p.XX) state that “Since human trafficking is a complex, highly contested, and multi-faceted practice, it is not easily reduced to the crude generalizations upon which many indicators rest ... [their study explores how] the uncritical use of indicators can both contribute to stereotypical and unachievable ideals of victimhood and engender undue criminalization or withholding of victim support” (De Vries and Cockbain, 2023). De Vries and Cockbain’s arguments are supported by the interview data collected in this thesis. For example, participants codenamed ID-1 and ID-3 respectively both speak to the false mainstream perception of those being trafficked. ID-1 and ID-3 respectively both look at the cultural perceptions surrounding trafficking in different ways.

But even in that community, it's almost like the boys who are exploited or, you know, male sex workers are looked at, almost solely, even in that, again, from that lens of that population as volunteering and part you know, participation and being promiscuous. Us, which is very fascinating to me. And yet sad, because how can a 12-year-old boy just because he identifies as gay, bi, or trans, now be a participant because they're discovering sexual freedom. versus, you know, if it was a heterosexual, you know, female it'd be considered a victim.



ID-3 on the other hand works for the Navajo nation as his code name implies and as such has a more nuanced, micro view of the issue of perception and cultural norms surrounding trafficking. This is because Navajo custom differs greatly from the American mainstream custom and as such their attitudes on sex and trafficking diverge. ID-3 states that,

And, and so it can make treatment difficult. Because if you're, if you're not willing, as a culture to say, this is wrong, this shouldn't be happening, then you're going to continue to put your children at risk, for sure. And that is for me, that's the most frustrating part of it. Yeah, I was at a conference with the First Lady and a number of other people, major people in human trafficking, law enforcement and stuff. And you know, what was the name of this conference on human trafficking? Building a resistant child.

The participant codenamed ID-2 further spoke to the attitudes on sex in the cultural mainstream and how that impacts trafficking.

Um, and so I mean, pornography plays a big part in this as well, like, I've done many studies with, you know, young girls under the age of 12, that say, oh, we just feel invisible to boys if we're not naked or taking up our clothes or doing something weird on social media. So, you know, I think the pressures are just, they all play into each other, you know, what I mean? more readily available now than it ever has been in the history of our world, young, you know, people are

consuming pornography, and then the expectation is to, you know, have somebody do that on a webcam?

The issue remains the same, the cultural perception surrounding sex trafficking in all realms remains one dimensional and unrepresentative to the experiences of those being trafficked. Moreover, this paper argues that the false cultural perception contributes to negative effects on the lived experiences of those being trafficked. False cultural perceptions have been shown throughout scholarly literature to create systemic difficulties for those being trafficked (Weitzer, 2014). Moreover, it has also been shown to make the process of trafficking easier for the perpetrators. Criminological and Sociological research on trafficking has repeatedly shown that false cultural perception and lack of knowledge about trafficking on part of the public makes victim identification that much more difficult. Given that trafficking already remains discrete by its very nature, the pushing of false media perceptions and lack of recognition of the effects of trafficking in society makes the process even more discrete which further incentivizes perpetrators (Weitzer, 2014). The second main argument that this discussion section makes is that the sociopolitical realities surrounding trafficking, in terms of legislation, prosecution difficulty and success rates as well as victim identification all contribute to the lived individualized experiences of those being trafficked. One of the main issues surrounding human trafficking and one which contributes to its exacerbation throughout society is the relative lack of standardized legislative language about human trafficking. Farrell et al. echoes this argument within their research stating that the lack of standardization at both the state and federal level for legislation involving the prosecution

of traffickers remains poor. State governments vary in their legislation on human trafficking and the lack of federal standardized legislation on the subject makes the crime difficult to prosecute within the American courts (Farrel et al., 2012, pp. 2) . Moreover, traffickers themselves are aware of these legislative realities and as such exploit the legislation or lack thereof to further reify the trafficking business (Farrel et al., 2012, pp. 2). The participant codenamed ID-3 spoke to the psychological ‘warfare’ that traffickers engage in during the recruitment process of trafficking.

There's a lot of psychological warfare, essentially, that goes on there until we can learn from the mental wealth, every now that's been around, you know, mental wellness, excuse me, and it's been around for years news, like what works well, how do you transition people out of a residential facility and mental wellness doc into the world, you know, all these different things and so I think looking for similarities in other arenas that are not as new are very helpful to us. And like I said, to me, that's in the mental wellness arena, because so much of the program is just, you know, psychotherapy, psychiatry, psychology, that sort of thing. And those traumas are certainly not a new thing.

In addition to the lack of policies focused on victim care and victim service the participants also emphasize that the laws to prosecute traffickers are insufficient as well. As such, traffickers have an easy time getting away with the process of recruiting and trafficking other humans. ID-2 reports on this phenomenon in her interview stating that,

It's gotten worse every year since I've been in a field where our laws are insufficient, people don't get punished. Traffickers get away with it because they are so well insulated. And because the laws are insufficient. There's a loophole in the law that allows you to charge somebody with a lesser crime. And so, traffickers get away with things because they play out. Because our system is overcrowded with criminals in general. Yes, yeah. And so there's all those things at play, and then we're putting a bandage on the people who have been trafficked. We're not doing great at services because there's just not enough safe homes that are great for temporary fixes.

Indeed, the effect on trafficked people is two pronged according to both the scholarship and the interviews themselves. First and foremost, there exists a vast lack of standardization in terms of the legislative language surrounding trafficking in the United States (Farrel et al., 2012). The federal laws surrounding trafficking in the US are not standardized and leave it up to each individual state to make their own laws about trafficking. The result is stratification, both on part of states abilities to prosecute traffickers and their legislative power to protect victims either escaping the life or preventing them from being in the life in the first place (Farrel et al., 2012).

Moreover, the second impact of legislation impacts the psychological incentives of traffickers themselves. Traffickers are not oblivious to the goings on of the legislative system and as such understand that the system is easy to beat depending on what state they are in. As such, traffickers adjust their methods accordingly since they know that the risk to them is relatively low (Farrel et al., 2012; Meshkovska et al., 2015; Weitzer,

2014;). Both of these arguments are echoed by the participants as well as the research itself.

The legislative barriers facing trafficking as a field and the relative difficulty in prosecuting traffickers themselves remains an ongoing and pressing issue for trafficking activists. However, the establishment of robust standardized legislation, although necessary, should not only focus on the criminalization efforts of those perpetrating trafficking. Rather, legislation involving trafficking in the United States should lay out robust and mandatory guidelines for ensuring the safety of trafficking victims. Moreover, legislation should be put in place which guides the prevention of trafficking through mandatory education efforts and the like. The research thus far on human trafficking echoes much of these sentiments laid out by the participants in terms of legislation, prosecution, and protection of victims (Meshkovska et al., 2015; Weitzer, 2014). Additionally, phenomenologically speaking all of the socio-political aspects of trafficking, coercion methods as well as the experiences of activists working in the field all have their foundational roots in language and communication. Namely, the idea that in this field, understanding of the language used to reify trafficking as well as the language surrounding it is paramount in understanding the lived experiences of those being trafficked.

When considering the lived experiences of trafficking victims, the participants all shared a few commonalities and a few differences. But across the board, participants emphasize that the trafficking of persons is a systemic multifaceted issue which cannot be solved through hard facts and statistics alone (Farrel et al., 2012; Meshkovska et al., 2015; Weitzer, 2014). Moreover, the political, social, and epistemic focus of activists

should be on the psychological state of the victims themselves. In addition to unfair criminalization efforts of victims as well as the intentional withholding of support for victims seeking to escape, there also exists difficulty in prosecuting traffickers due to legislative barriers and lack of standardization across all elements of the law. Moreover, experienced based studies grounded in conceptual frameworks such as phenomenology, epistemology and ontology serve to highlight the lived experiences of those being trafficked. As such, I argue that understanding the lived experiences of trafficked people can help curtail the false mainstream perception of trafficking that has been pushed.

Central to understanding the lived experiences of trafficked people is a delineation of the psychological consequences of trafficking both in the coercion process as well as the process of being in traffic. Moreover, the coercive methods utilized by traffickers' prey primarily on vulnerabilities inherent to trafficking victims. Exploitation of these vulnerabilities and the '*life world*' of trafficking victims is central to the coercion process (Reid et al., 2005). The exploitation of vulnerabilities remains the foremost manner in which traffickers exploit prospective victims and push them into the life of trafficking. Moreover, the issue of trafficking with regards to the exploitation of vulnerabilities is not only a socio-political issue but one which involves the ontological and phenomenological leanings of the individual being coerced. The messages that traffickers use and the vulnerabilities that they exploit vary depending on the particular '*lifeworld*' of the people they are exploiting and as such is inextricably linked to notions of epistemology and ontology.

Interpretive phenomenology as a concept is grounded in a hermeneutic understanding of phenomenology. Interpretive phenomenology as a method consists of a

double hermeneutic which has great implications for its validity as a research method. In order to begin this discussion of hermeneutic phenomenology an understanding of what the study of hermeneutics is proves necessary for this discussion. Hermeneutics as a concept can be defined as “the systems of interpretation, both recollective and iconoclastic, used by man to reach the meaning behind myths and symbols.” (Makkreel, 1971, p. 114). Hermeneutics exists as the interpretive method by which human beings understand stories and symbols. The construction of these stories and symbols is central to the coercion process of trafficking hence the importance of hermeneutics in understanding the experience of trafficking.

Human trafficking concerns the notion of interpretation and coercion on part of the victim and trafficker and as such the prospective victim’s interpretation of the meaning behind the ‘myths and symbols’ disseminated by traffickers is central to understanding their lived experience. Moreover, methodologically, interpretive phenomenology exists as a double hermeneutic which can be further defined as “The process of uncovering the essence of lived experiences may be described as a qualitative researcher identifying the phenomenon of a human experience and then deriving a description that represents the very nature of the experience” (Bush et al., 2019, pp. 4). This conception of phenomenology originates with figures such as Martin Heidegger, Merlot-Ponty, Husserl as main contributors to its school of thought.

Empirical sociological research presumes forms of being without doing proper evaluation on them and as such a generalization is made that ontological considerations are not evaluated adequately or are presumed and taken for granted. A phenomenological method does not take ontology for granted and seeks to establish the structures of the

forms of being to determine whether an empirical science can be derived. Social science studies on human trafficking carry important utility in establishment of trends and illustrating by numbers what trafficking looks like. However, while quantitative sociological inquiries remain essential to the understanding of human trafficking's impact on society, the fundamental process of trafficking remains communicative and based on individuals' inherent state of being.

Overall, the phenomenological literature suggests that presupposition of the ontology of man proves detrimental to the overall state of the research regarding human trafficking (Bush et al., 2019; Deetz, 1973; Teo, 2010). Instead, what ought to be included within the broad scope of human trafficking literature is the exact mechanism by which these processes are played out in a micro sense. The effect on the individual, the effect on the mind all should be included as part of the metric used to determine human trafficking' effect on society.

Human beings can come from perfectly stable lives and still be victims of trafficking given their epistemological and psychological leanings. These unique leanings are not accounted for and as such many of these cases are excluded from a classical approach to studying human trafficking. One ought to work from the perspective that enables one to make problematic what one takes for granted, so in the case of human trafficking that means not taking for granted everyone's unique ontology which might have led them down this path. Moreover, because this is a phenomenological analysis on methods of coercion, it is all the more important to not generalize as the effectiveness of coercion methods necessarily depends on a person's state of being. In a sense, the thing being manipulated by the traffickers is the ontology of the victim as the coercive rhetoric



needs to appeal and resonate with the victim for the traffickers' goals of victimization to be met.

Deetz (2009), through Heidegger, makes an important contribution to the conversation surrounding phenomenology and further complicates the relationship between language and experience. He states specifically that “The assertive or objectifying mode of experience is derived, abstracted, from the encounter with a thing and as such is a rather narrow field with few implications for action” (p. 45). Many classical sociological studies involving human trafficking take an ‘assertive’ or ‘objectifying’ approach according to Deetz. In essence, the object being studied, in this case the trafficker or the trafficked person, has qualities assigned to them presumed by the researcher. The relationship between the trafficker and the soon-to-be trafficked person is of the utmost importance when looking at the origin of coercive methods involving trafficking. Phenomenology repurposes the role of language and makes it not derivative but inherent to the originating experience between the speaker and the listener. Deetz elaborates: “To call a strange shaped modern piece of furniture a chair is not so much an identification of attributes as a suggestion that one may sit on it. Heidegger maintained that we understand the meaning of things in language by ‘listening’ to the staying power of language” (2009, p. 45). First, the example utilized showcases that language is necessarily not derivative, but rather an integral and intertwined part of conscious experience. Living exists in the flow of language and experience is derived from language, not the other way around. The coercive process involved in human trafficking necessarily involves communication as the primary mediums of coercion that are utilized. Traffickers manipulate language such that they can have an indelible

influence on the lived experience of whoever they are targeting. Through delineation of transcribed interviews and through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, themes, and subthemes about the experiences of activists in the field were derived through coding. The analysis reported contributes to the research on human trafficking by illuminating the understanding of the coercive methods that are fundamental to trafficking. The construction of these interviews was centered around this purpose of understanding the methods utilized by traffickers. However, beyond that the sociopolitical realities which make people vulnerable to trafficking in the first place also serve in creating a more nuanced understanding of human trafficking.

Through this analysis, I have demonstrated that the coercive process of trafficking involves an indelible influence on the experiential '*lifeworld*' of its targets (Reid et al., 2005). Phenomenology as a method proves useful in exploring this concept of coercion as the most fundamental aspect being exploited is the psychological and experiential state of prospective victims. As argued earlier, research detailing the experiences of those being trafficked and activists working in the field of trafficking remains sparse. Moreover, the emphasis on quantitative data about trafficking has meant there is a lack of qualitative research to provide a deeper scholarly understanding about trafficking as a phenomenon, particularly experiential perspectives. As such, the phenomenological and thematic analyses reported here contributes to the research and wider understandings about the human experience of trafficking.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The scourge of human trafficking and the severity of its impact on victims cannot be understated. Throughout this interpretive phenomenological analysis activists' perspectives about the individualized experiences of those being trafficked were delineated and analyzed according to the stipulations set about by IPA. This paper argues that human trafficking is a fundamentally individual, epistemic issue wherein the recruitment and coercion process directly targets a person's lived experience and the circumstances surrounding that experience.

The lack of access to basic needs, the socio-political realities surrounding trafficking as well as the psychological consequences involved with trafficking are three key issues which anti-trafficking organizations have to deal with on a daily basis. Through IPA, a semi-structured interview guide was developed which allowed the interviews to function more like a conversation rather than based on presumed questions (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). The utility of this was such that the researcher achieved an understanding of both the experiences of activists and an understanding of activists' perspectives on trafficking victims' individualized experiences as well. Interpretive phenomenological analysis takes place in the spirit of a double hermeneutic standard wherein the participants have to interpret their own experience, communicate said experience to the researcher and then have the researcher make their own subjective interpretation of the participants' experience. Fundamentally, human trafficking is a sociological and criminological issue and the majority of research detailing human trafficking has focused on the establishment of hard and fast statistics over utilizing an

understanding of the individualized experiences of trafficked people. This paper argues that trafficking affects people's individualized psychology and as such understanding it from a phenomenological lens carries great utility in not only delineating that experience but informing future quantitative studies about the topic. There are a few limitations to this masters' thesis. First and foremost is the issue of intercoder reliability and the individualized nature of this assignment.

Due to time constraints, and lack of resources, only one coder was involved in analyzing and identifying the data. In an optimal scenario, an interpretive phenomenological analysis would benefit from a team of coders working in tandem and coming to a consensus on the appropriate themes and subthemes. However, this thesis mitigated the effects of intercoder reliability by utilizing the coding software known as NVivo which allowed for careful parsing and organization of the data. This study would benefit from a larger sample size as well as six human trafficking activists do not provide an adequate picture of what the broad landscape of human trafficking looks like.

Overall, the main utility of this research was to gain insight into the individualized experiences of activists and their takes on what traffickers as individuals go through when being recruited, in traffic and out of the life of trafficking. The use of interpretive phenomenology places priority on understanding of individualized experience above all else and as such serves to highlight each activist's particular concerns when it comes down to recruitment, psychological consequences of trafficking and the socio-political realities which all work together to bolster the trafficking business.

## REFERENCES

- Aronowitz\*, A. A. (2010). Overcoming the challenges to accurately measuring the phenomenon of human trafficking. *Revue internationale de droit pénal*, 81(3), 493-511.
- Baldwin, S. B., Fehrenbacher, A. E., & Eisenman, D. P. (2015). Psychological coercion in human trafficking: An application of Biderman's framework. *Qualitative health research*, 25(9), 1171-1181.
- Balfour, G., Callands, T., Okech, D., & Kombian, G. (2020). Lifeline: A qualitative analysis of the post intervention experiences of human trafficking survivors and at-risk women in Ghana. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 17(3), 332-346.
- Bush, E. J., Singh, R. L., & Kooienga, S. (2019). Lived experiences of a community: Merging interpretive phenomenology and community-based participatory research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1609406919875891.
- Chapman-Schmidt, B. (2019). 'Sex trafficking' as epistemic violence. *Anti-trafficking review*, (12), 172-187.
- Cohen, D. J., & Crabtree, B. F. (2008). Evaluative criteria for qualitative research in health care: controversies and recommendations. *The Annals of Family Medicine*, 6(4), 331-339.
- Cordisco Tsai, L., Lim, V., & Nhanh, C. (2022). Perspectives of boys on their experiences in human trafficking shelter programming in Cambodia. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 32(1), 17-32.
- Dempsey, M. M., Hoyle, C., & Bosworth, M. (2012). Defining sex trafficking in international and domestic law: Mind the gaps. *Emory Int'l L. Rev.*, 26, 137.
- Deetz, S. (1973). Words without things: Toward a social phenomenology of language. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59(1), 40-51.
- De Luca Picione, R. (2015). The idiographic approach in psychological research. The challenge of overcoming old distinctions without risking to homogenize. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49, 360-370.
- De Vries, I., & Cockbain, E. (2023). *Governing through Indicators: Structural biases and empirical challenges in indicator-based approaches to human trafficking research and policy*. Bristol University Press.

- Dugassa, B. F. (2008). Indigenous knowledge, colonialism and epistemological violence: The experience of the Oromo people under Abyssinian colonial rule (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto).
- Farrell, A., McDevitt, J., Pfeffer, R., Fahy, S., Owens, C., Dank, M., & Adams, W. (2012). Identifying challenges to improve the investigation and prosecution of state and local human trafficking cases.
- Feingold, D. A. (2005). Human trafficking. *Foreign policy*, 26-32.
- Gallagher, A. (2001). Human rights and the new UN protocols on trafficking and migrant smuggling: A preliminary analysis. *Hum. Rts. Q.*, 23, 975.
- Hee-Soon, Y. (2019). North Korean women and girls trafficked into China's sex trade. *Journal of Trafficking and Human Exploitation*, 3(1), 159-178.
- Heidegger, M. (2008). *Being and Time*. HarperCollins
- Heidegger, M. (1983). *Martin Heidegger*. Editrice La Garangola.
- Hussein, R. A. (2015). The existing tensions in the defining of human trafficking at a UK and international level: a critical overview. *International journal of comparative and applied criminal justice*, 39(2), 129-138.
- Kosmas, D., Melander, C., Singerhouse, E., Sharkey, T. C., Maass, K. L., Barrick, K., & Martin, L. (2022). Generating synthetic but realistic human trafficking networks for modeling disruptions through transdisciplinary and community-based action research. *arXiv e-prints*, arXiv-2203.
- Kosmas, D., Melander, C., Singerhouse, E., Sharkey, T. C., Maass, K. L., Barrick, K., & Martin, L. (2023). A Transdisciplinary Approach for Generating Synthetic but Realistic Domestic Sex Trafficking Networks. *IISE Transactions*, (just-accepted), 1-37.
- Laura Cordisco Tsai, Vanntheary Lim, Elizabeth Hentschel, Chanthha Nhanh. (2021) Strengthening Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking: Recommendations from Survivors in Cambodia. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, pages 1-17.
- Lerum, K., & Brents, B. G. (2016). Sociological perspectives on sex work and human trafficking. *Sociological perspectives*, 59(1), 17-26.

- Limoncelli, S. A. (2009, July). The trouble with trafficking: Conceptualizing women's sexual labor and economic human rights. In *Women's studies international forum* (Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 261-269). Pergamon.
- Love, B., Vetere, A., & Davis, P. (2020). Should interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) be used with focus groups? Navigating the bumpy road of “iterative loops,” idiographic journeys, and “phenomenological bridges”. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920921600
- Lutya, T. M. (2009). Epi-criminological responses to human trafficking of young women and girls for involuntary prostitution in South Africa. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 10(S1), 59-78.
- Makkreel, R. A. (1971). Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 9(1), 114-116.
- McKnight, S. J. (2022). *Gender Differences in Views of Vice: A Comparative Phenomenology of Prostitution and Human Sex Trafficking*. Liberty University.
- Meshkovska, B., Siegel, M., Stutterheim, S. E., & Bos, A. E. (2015). Female sex trafficking: Conceptual issues, current debates, and future directions. *Journal of sex research*, 52(4), 380-395.
- Ngwe, J. E., & Elechi, O. O. (2012). Human trafficking: The modern day slavery of the 21st century. *African Journal of Criminology & Justice Studies*, 6.
- O'Brien, E., Hayes, S., & Carpenter, B. (2013). *The politics of sex trafficking: a moral geography*. Springer.
- Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J. A. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological journal*, 20(1), 7-14.
- Ravi, A., Pfeiffer, M. R., Rosner, Z., & Shea, J. A. (2017). Identifying health experiences of domestically sex-trafficked women in the USA: A qualitative study in Rikers Island jail. *Journal of urban health*, 94, 408-416.
- Reid, K., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2005). Exploring lived experience. *The psychologist*.

- Sartre, J. P. (1970). Intentionality: A fundamental idea of Husserl's phenomenology. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 1(2), 4-5.
- Sukach, T., Castañeda, N. G., & Pickens, J. C. (2018). Experiences of Female Sex Trafficking Survivors: A Phenomenological Analysis. *Qualitative Report*, 23(6).
- Sertich, M., & Heemskerk, M. (2011). Ghana's human trafficking act: Successes and shortcomings in six years of implementation. *Human Rights Brief*, 19(1), 1.
- Streeten, P. (1984). Basic needs: some unsettled questions. *World development*, 12(9), 973-978.
- Teo, T. (2010). What is epistemological violence in the empirical social sciences?. *Social and personality psychology compass*, 4(5), 295-303.
- Todres, J. (2009). Law, otherness, and human trafficking. *Santa Clara L. Rev.*, 49, 605.
- United States State Department, 20th ed, United Nations, 2020, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*
- Vindhya, U., & Dev, V. S. (2011). Survivors of sex trafficking in Andhra Pradesh: Evidence and testimony. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(2), 129-165.
- Woods, M., Paulus, T., Atkins, D. P., & Macklin, R. (2016). Advancing qualitative research using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)? Reviewing potential versus practice in published studies using ATLAS. ti and NVivo, 1994–2013. *Social science computer review*, 34(5), 597-617.
- Weitzer, R. (2014). New directions in research on human trafficking. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 653(1), 6-24.
- Zimmerman, Y. C. (2011). Christianity and human trafficking. *Religion Compass*, 5(10), 567-578.