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Labeling and framing of human trafficking victimhood

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Labeling and Framing of Human Trafficking Victimhood

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A Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Arts and Letters

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Bachelor of Science

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by Elizabeth Regina Ramirez Kemp

May 2014

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate my honors thesis to the staff, volunteers, and clients who welcomed me into their loving community.

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the amount of support, encouragement, and assistance that has guided me through my experience and allowed me to complete this thesis.

I would like to thank the staff that welcomed me enthusiastically into their office, lives, and community. Their open-hearted compassion gave me a new perspective on how to face life and the challenges I faced in my research. I would also like to express my appreciation for each of the service providers and law enforcement officials who took the time to do in-depth interviews in the spirit of solidarity. I am extremely grateful to the clients who selflessly shared their experiences with me and taught me what it means to trust with your whole heart.

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Abstract

Victims and victimhood are socially constructed concepts that are given meaning through interaction. Human trafficking victims face labels that are interpreted through a variety of frames due to the complex nature of discourses surrounding human trafficking. Based on 304 hours of participant observation and 10 semi-structured interviews with service providers, law enforcement, and survivors of human trafficking I first seek to identify the ways service providers and law enforcement officials use labels and neutralization techniques to support an overall frame of human trafficking as an issue of human rights. Second, I analyze how their efforts to neutralize the label of "human trafficking victim" affect victims' ability to self-identify as a victim and gain access to services. Finally, I argue that individualistic frames of human trafficking distract from the root causes that underlie trafficking victimization.

Introduction

Analysts, scholars, and activists use the term "human trafficking" to refer to a broad category of crimes that can include labor trafficking, forced prostitution, exploitation of children, and sex trafficking. While there is significant debate about the way human trafficking should be defined, in this article I will refer to human trafficking in accordance with the legal definition in the United States. The Victims of Trafficking Violence Protection Act (TVPA), which was enacted by Congress in 2000, broadly defines trafficking in persons as "the illicit enslavement of individuals into labor or commercial sex through means of force, fraud, or coercion" (Aron et al. 2006). The Act also focuses specifically on sex trafficking and labor trafficking by defining "severe forms of trafficking" in these terms.

> Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age (22 USC § 7102; 8 CFR § 214.11(a)).
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> Labor trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (22 USC § 7102).

This definition has become the standard for victims to be labeled both in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of Non-Govermental Organizations (NGO) that provide services that are specific to trafficking victims. Both foreign national and domestic victims rely on being deemed a victim by those who hold the power to label or not label them as such. The TVPA established a legal certification process for foreign national victims, who had been trafficked into the United

States, that gives them the option to apply for T nonimmigrant status (T-Visa) and permanent residency in exchange for their cooperation during the investigation and prosecution of their trafficker(s) (Aron et al. 2006). While domestic victims are not reliant on a legal certification, they must be identified and labeled as a victim of human trafficking in order to be given access to benefits and services that are designated for trafficking victims. Because many victims do not self identify, they are often dependent on law enforcement and service providers to see them as victims and identify them correctly. In addition, many victims go unidentified, or are misidentified as criminals and arrested for crimes related to their victimization (Farrell and Fahy, 2009).

The hidden nature of human trafficking makes it difficult to identify the scope of the issue. Worldwide estimates of the number of people trafficked per year range from 1 to 2 million (Parmentier, 2010), and it is often cited as the second fastest growing criminal industry in the world (Moser, 2012). There are some scholars and advocates who assert that trafficking in persons has reached "epic proportions", while others believe that most estimates of number of victims are exaggerated (Reiger, 2007). Despite widespread disagreement about the definition, scope, and nature of human trafficking, there has recently been a considerable increase in the amount of public awareness, research focus, and political priority placed on combating human trafficking (Laczko and Gramegna, 2003).

Increased awareness and political support for combating human trafficking has been attributed, in part, to the successful framing of human trafficking as a human rights issue. Put simply, frames are "cognitive structures that help define how one sees the world" (Farrell and Fahy, 2009). Social movements activists often manufacture frames to shape the way a social problem is interpreted. Since the 1990s, the anti-trafficking movement has relied heavily on a

human rights frame by asserting that trafficking is a violation of a victim's human rights, and it is the responsibility of the state to prevent such abuse. Once anti-trafficking frames are established, "norm-entrepreneurs" must adopt, communicate, and translate them to shape discourse around human trafficking (Lobaz, 2012).

In my observations and interviews I found that service providers that work with human trafficking victims reinforce and support the human rights frame through their interactions with victims, other service providers, and community members. Their techniques, however, rely heavily on a construction of a "pure" victim of human trafficking that has no agency or choice during their victimization. While this construction has been successful in neutralizing an destigmatizing the label of "human trafficking victim", it has created a perception that a lack of agency is a requirement of being labeled a victim. Because many women perceive themselves as having some agency during their victimization, they are not able to see themselves reflected in the pure victim frame. This tension prevents many victims from self identifying as a victim and seeking out appropriate services. This makes many victims reliant on service providers and law enforcement to correctly label them as victims and give them access to services. As a result, many victims go unidentified and are not given access to services that are designated for victims of human trafficking.

Literature Review

The complexity of the issue of human trafficking has resulted in a wide variety of theoretical perspectives used to frame and define the crime. Scholars from a variety of disciplines, such as critical legal studies, criminal justice studies, ethnic studies, anthropology and sociology, have used varied approaches to the study of trafficking and brought forth an equally wide range of frames used to portray trafficking as a social problem (Musto, 2009). Literature on human trafficking over the past three decades has included views of trafficking as a "dark side" of globalization, the result of feminized migration, destabilized governments, a form of violence against women, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (Musto, 2009).

Existing research focuses heavily on the scale of the problem of human trafficking, often trying to quantify the number of victims produced or provide a geographic analysis of trafficking routes (Gozdziak and Collett, 2005). Despite a substantial amount of research in this area, there is almost no consensus on the true scope of the issue, and many scholars assert that there are no reliable statistics on the number of trafficking victims, or the characteristics of victims and offenders (Gozdziak and Collett, 2005; Laczko and Gramegna, 2003; Musto, 2009).

A second body of research that is well supported is the study of legal frameworks and policy responses to combat trafficking both nationally and internationally (Gozdziak and Collett, 2005; Farrell and Fahy, 2009). Analysts have critiqued the tendency of the US government to develop policies in response to activist agendas rather than empirical research (Laczko and Gramegna, 2003). Many cite the framing of human trafficking as a human rights issue as central to the success of the anti-trafficking movement (Denton, 2010). However, existing research on the framing of the anti-trafficking efforts use a macro level perspective to understand the impact that frames have on the success of the movement.

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Despite an extensive body of research on human trafficking from a variety of disciplines, only a small minority of this research uses a microsociological theory or qualitative methods (Denton, 2010). Social movement framing has played a large role in the influence of anti-trafficking rhetoric on social policy and public opinion, but very few studies have explored the ways activists create and reproduce those frames by constructing meaning through interaction.

The focus on macro level analysis in existing research on human trafficking also provides little insight into the experiences and meaning-making processes of victims. Victims' voices have been excluded from research both in a literal sense and a symbolic sense. Few studies have included input from victims through qualitative interviews and direct surveys, and much of the research done on human trafficking reduces victims to one-dimensional figures whose stories are simplified and erased (Gozdziak and Collett, 2005; Kelly, 2005). This absence calls for research that tells the stories of victims from their own perspectives.

Setting and Methods

Field Site

The Safe Place (TSP)[1] is a nonprofit organization that provides case management services to victims of human trafficking. Depending on clients' needs, TSP is able to provide or connect clients with medical care, spiritual development, immigration services, legal services, substance abuse treatment, job and life skills training, shelter, counseling, mentoring, education support, and food and clothing donations. In most cases, the organization serves as a liaison that contacts service providers for each client based on an individual's needs, makes appropriate appointments and provides transportation when needed. After a client is referred to TSP, the agency follows a three stage process in providing care: (1) Safety and stability; (2) Trauma care and skills development; and (3) Reintegration to community. Through this model, the case manager provides emotional support and guides the client through each phase of the program. TSP service providers pride themselves on having no "time limit" on their services, or time restraints on when each client is expected to move on to the next stage of recovery. The TSP staff describes the case manager and client relationship as one where the service provider is "walking the journey with them."

The central and foundational idea behind TSP's mission is for the office to serve as a drop-in center that provides a safe place for victims of human trafficking. Because of this, the agency's address and location is confidential. All clients, volunteers, and staff were asked not to disclose the location of the office. The office was open during regular business hours, from 9:00 AM until 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday. The office itself was a large, open room with several desks, a conference table, and a couch. Adjacent to the office there was a smaller room that served as an office with a desk and a couch. This room could be closed off by a door, and

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[1] All names of people, places, and organizations are pseudonyms.

was often used for referrals and meetings with clients. The larger part of the office was used primarily as office space for the Executive Director, Chief Operations Officer, and six interns. The smaller room served as the office for the case manager on staff. In my time there, clients usually came in to the office to meet the case manager, interns, or volunteers for appointments. While it was rare in practice, clients were allowed to drop-in and stay in the office as they pleased. In my time there, there were only two occasions that a client used the drop-in center as a place to stay during the day, but the option was available during regular business hours for the entirety of my time there.

TSP is located in State City, a large, metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. The city is located along a major interstate and is a point of destination for many trafficking victims. At the time that I began my research at TSP the agency was small and relatively new as an organization. The organization was co-founded in 2010 by Nate and Jessica, who became interested in providing services to victims of human trafficking when they found out the crime was prevalent in State City, and there was no existing organization that exclusively served this population. They gained 501 (c)(3) nonprofit status in October of 2010, and began serving clients in February of 2012. I began my research with the agency in June of 2013, spending roughly 40 hours a week with the agency for period of nine weeks. At the time, the organization was comprised of three full time staff members, three full-time interns, three part-time interns, and a network of part-time volunteers.

Gaining entry to TSP

Because I was interested in studying the impact of human trafficking at a state level, I hoped to conduct research at an agency within my home state. I chose to contact TSP because the organizational values and rhetoric that I perceived on their website was in-line with my own

values. I emailed the contact information posted on their website and promptly received a response from the Executive Director, Nate, suggesting that we set up a meeting over the phone. Nate told me they were looking for a Research Intern to help them research "best practices" for providing services to victims of human trafficking by drawing on models of care for related fields such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and HIV/AIDs services. I explained that I was hoping to gain insight to the process of providing services to victims of human trafficking through participant observation and interviews with staff and clients. We agreed that I would join them the following June as their Research Intern and as an observer for my research.

I arrived in the area in June of 2013 and began my time at TSP as a part of a group of six interns that were all joining the staff at the same time. We arrived at the office on our first day and spent the next three days going through TSP's volunteer training course. After this course we were all qualified to serve any volunteer needs that may come up, such as driving clients to appointments or picking up and dropping off donations. Three of the interns were on staff specifically to work closely with clients in providing services and mentorship, and three of us worked more on administrative tasks. I was the only intern designated to do research specifically, but all interns helped with various research tasks.

Role as a Participant Observer

All staff members and interns knew that I was also doing research through observation and interviews both on-site and off-site. I took on an "active-membership-researcher" role (Adler and Adler, 1987) during my time there, and was in the office from 9:00 AM until 5:00 PM every weekday. In addition to conducting research, I helped with organizational tasks such as designing brochures, invitations, fliers, and web graphics, and assisted in updating the organization's website. I attended and contributed during weekly staff meetings, worked with the

other interns to plan and host a community outreach event, attended web seminars related to victim services, and occasionally helped with client services.

Data Collection

Between June and July of 2013 I spent a total of 304 hours in the TSP office or doing TSP related work. While most of this time took place in the office, I also participated in community events and out-of-office community meetings. I took field notes on my laptop when I had the opportunity, and often took notes immediately after returning home after a day at the office or at an event. I also completed 10 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with nine participants who had a variety of backgrounds and experiences with human trafficking victim services. Of the nine participants, two were on staff at TSP, three were service providers at other agencies that serve human trafficking survivors, one was a law enforcement agent, and three were human trafficking survivors. I began by interviewing two members on staff at TSP, who then worked with me to either contact or give me contact information for other service providers at similar agencies. The case manager on staff selected and contacted past clients that she believed would be interested in participating and coordinated their interview appointments. All but one of the service providers and law enforcement were initially contacted by either Nate, the Executive Director, or Jessica, the Case Manager over email and then forwarded to me after they expressed interest. The exception to this was Caroline, who was a local service provider that worked closely with TSP and I was able to contact directly.

Interview participants had a wide range of backgrounds and connections to human trafficking. Of the five service providers interviewed, two were on staff at TSP. Two interviews were done over the phone with out of state service providers at agencies that provided services solely to foreign born victims human trafficking. One of these agencies had a shelter and one that

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did not. One participant was therapist at a local residential juvenile facility who worked with at-risk youth, some of whom had been identified as victims of human trafficking and some who were not. One interview participant was a federal law enforcement official that works with victims of human trafficking. All three trafficking survivors were TSP clients, one who had received services in the past and two who were currently receiving services.

Interviews were conducted in-person whenever possible, and over the phone when necessary. When interviews took place in person I let the participant choose the location and time of the interview. Of the six interviews that were done in-person, five interviews took place at the drop-in center in the smaller, private office. One of the in-person interviews took place at a nearby coffee shop. The remaining four interviews were done over the phone. Interviews ranged between 10 and 72 minutes, and usually lasted about 45 minutes. All interview participants consented to be audio recorded. All but one interview was done one-on-one, in English, and transcribed by me. One of my interviews was with a client who primarily spoke Spanish, so one of the interns who was fluent in both Spanish and English sat in to translate. She also transcribed the interview in English and Spanish. I used TAMSAnalyzer a qualitative data analysis software, to identify emergent themes and build my analysis.

Limitations

As with any research on victims of human trafficking, an array of methodological limitations pose a barrier. Underreporting, lack of identification of victims, and the stigma and illegal nature of trafficking all create challenges when it comes to studying this population (Musto, 2009). Much of the critique of both academic and public discourses concerning human trafficking centers around the heavy focus on the sexual exploitation side of trafficking (Denton, 2010; Gozdziak and Collett, 2005). Though sex trafficking is a relevant category of human

trafficking crimes, the heavy focus on sexual exploitation and relative neglect for studying the impact of labor trafficking is seen to be an inaccurate representation of human trafficking (Denton, 2010). Due to researcher interest and the population served by TSP, the current study fits into that (skewed) representation through its focus on female victims of sex trafficking and service providers who work primarily with this population. In my time at TSP I did not meet or interact with any male victims or any victims that had not been trafficked for sexual exploitation. At the time that I was working with TSP, they had served a client population that was 92% female, and 95% of their clients had been a victim of sex trafficking. As a result, all three victims that I interviewed were female victims of sex trafficking, and service providers at TSP used female pronouns and descriptions of sexual exploitation to refer to human trafficking and victims. As a result, conclusions can only be drawn about the social construction of sex trafficking victims rather than human trafficking victims more broadly.

While my role as an insider gave me access to significant insight I would not have been able to observe otherwise, my role as being a part of the TSP staff impacted the way my interview participants perceived our interactions. In my field notes I reflected on the fact that I felt that clients often felt pressured to give positive feedback about their experiences with TSP because they associated me with the staff. I worried that they were not comfortable being fully forthcoming about things that made them uncomfortable or frustrated. If they ever did express frustration I felt that they immediately minimized that experience and changed the subject to emphasize the positive aspects of working with TSP. To minimize this limitation I began to phrase questions in a way that would distance my association with TSP, but the association was not entirely avoidable. As a result, some of the evaluations of services and experiences may be skewed toward positive rather than negative evaluations.

The nature of the client pool that I had access to also skews data toward positive evaluations and "success stories." Because I was given access to survivors based on their current contact with TSP, it was inevitable that my client interviews would be with women who had been identified as trafficking victims, able to access services, and were not currently being trafficked or prostituted or engaging in voluntary prostitution. These conditions were, to my knowledge, true of all current clients at TSP. In addition, because TSP chose to give me access only to clients whom they believed were emotionally ready to talk about their experiences, the women I interviewed were more likely to give positive evaluations of their past experiences because they were doing well at that point in time.

A Note on Terminology

In this article I mirror the language and terminology that was used by the staff at TSP. In doing this I use the terms "victim," "survivor," and "client" to refer to people who have been trafficked. I, like the staff, use specific terminology that is dependent on context. During my time at TSP I developed a language to talk about trafficking victims and the issue more broadly. Generally, I use the term "victim" when speaking about a general category of human trafficking victims and "client" or "survivor" when talking about a specific person receiving services at TSP.

Neutralization Techniques

In American culture, those affected by crime are typically labeled as "victims." Labels can be placed on individuals through formal and informal processes that place individuals into social categories. While the label of "victim" can have positive implications, victimhood is often seen as a stigmatized identity. Because of this, those labeled as "victims" must cope with the meanings attached to this group. The meanings associated with victims and victimhood are socially constructed and emerge interactionally. In the pages that follow, I will outline these interactional processes and the meanings they create.

In my interviews and interactions at TSP I found that service providers and law enforcement frequently engaged in neutralization techniques to manage the stigma attached to sexual victimization. Through their language, organizational rhetoric, and community trainings they attempted to neutralize the label of "human trafficking victim." The neutralizations were primarily centered around a concept of human trafficking victims as having no agency at the time of their victimization, and therefore being worthy of help and not to blame for their misfortune, victimization, and criminal activity.

Gresham Sykes and David Matza's study on juvenile delinquents describes five neutralization techniques to mitigate feelings of guilt and negative self concepts from engaging in delinquent behavior (1957). In my interviews and observations I found that the primary technique service providers used to neutralize the label of "human trafficking victim" was to construct a denial of responsibility. By framing the human trafficking victim as someone who had no agency at the time of their victimization they were able to establish a way of framing human trafficking victims as innocent, moral beings who are not to be blamed for their victimization. This follows, then, that these victims are worthy of being helped. They constructed

this denial of responsibility by using passive language and emphasizing the emotions and psychological state of victims to deny their agency and control over their victimization.

In my observations, service providers, law enforcement, and victims themselves frequently used passive language to describe trafficking. For example, some service providers would use the phrase "being prostituted" and other language that describes the victimization as something that happened *to* victims. In my observations service providers rarely used language that highlighted an active role victims played during the time they were trafficked.

When I asked one survivor what her immediate needs were after coming to TSP for the first time she said, "Just them letting me know that this, that what was happening to me wasn't right." Because she had previously perceived herself as having some agency during her victimization, the notion that this was something that was happening "to" her was something she had not considered. The use of passive language shifts the focus of responsibility to an unnamed trafficker/victimizer, and, as the survivor quoted above points out, this can help victims to avoid feelings of self-blame. However, as an unintended consequence the use of passive language denied her, and other victims, agency in the context of their trafficking.

Service providers and victims used the word "situation" almost exclusively to describe trafficking. In one of my interviews a client said that she had come in contact with TSP as a response to a "situation that I was in back in December." This language was common in my interviews with service providers as well, with one person describing victims as being "just in a bad situation" and another referring to trafficking as a "situation" that "happened to them." This language erases the people involved and frames trafficking as an inevitable crime that exists outside of anyone's control. This framing not only denies the responsibility of traffickers – as if trafficking "just happens" – but it frames trafficking victims merely as passive actors in the

situation. This framing may explicitly counter victim-blaming rhetoric that pervades broader discussions of men's violence against women, but it may unintentionally deny victim's agentic choices and options in navigating the "situation" and their attempts to deal with it.

Service providers often made reference to the extent that victims had been traumatized and psychologically manipulated by their traffickers. Descriptions of emotions were often used to reinforce a victim's innocence and foster empathy for them. Arlie Hochschild's "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure" challenged theories that describe emotions as biologically driven impulses that are passively undergone (1979). While she asserts that emotive experience is an active process that is influenced by social factors, service provider's denial of responsibility relied on the more common assumption that emotions are biological impulses that can overcome individuals. By relying on this assumption, service providers emphasize victims' emotions and psychological state as a way of deflecting/denying victims' responsibility. When talking about barriers to providing services to victims of human trafficking, a law enforcement official told me, "A lot of the times working with especially sex trafficking victims who have been doing it for a while, it's like a slow, steady process of chipping away at an outer shell. Because, you know, their coping skills sometimes are drug abuse, and you know it's gonna be alcohol, or sometimes just making themselves feel like they're an object and not a person. That's not something that's easy to overcome in a couple of meetings." In this case, her emphasis on emotional coping strategies was a way to assert that victims are not to be faulted for behaviors and crimes related to their victimization. Another service provider used a similar account when describing victims who have a relationship with their trafficker. "Clients have this just strong relationship with the trafficker because of the brainwashing that has happened, and just do not want to view the trafficker in that way they have been building on for year. They may have been

brainwashed by the trafficker for years on end." This focus on the psychological state of the victim both highlights the power imbalance in the trafficker/victim relationship and furthers the denial of responsibility by framing a victims' actions as outside of their control.

Another service provider described victims' emotional pain in order to justify and explain clients' decisions through the recovery process as well. When describing the fact that some clients refuse services she said, "Those who decide not to go with the program, or not to go with part of the program, it's not their fault. You know, they're not bad for it, or it's not that they care less. I just think that looking at it as far as like trauma goes, they may be afraid to take care of that because it's so painful. So I don't blame them for not wanting that." Here she explicitly states that a victim is not at fault for decisions that they make as a consequence of the emotional trauma.

These kinds of accounts were common in my daily observations at TSP as well. While conversations about the nature of trafficking rarely made any mention to specific physical trauma for either clients or victims in general, the emotional trauma of victims was central to our expectations of victims. While emotions were mentioned frequently when speaking about human trafficking as a social problem, mention of psychological trauma and entrapment was most emphasized when justifying a victim or client's actions or inactions. Similar to flight attendants attempts to explain or justify rude flyers' behavior to avoid getting angry at them (Hochschild 1983), this continued emphasis on emotional pain helped service providers cope with the fact that clients often made decisions that were frustrating to cope with, such as refusing services, missing appointments, or returning to their traffickers. Whether clients saw themselves through such a lens or not, service providers' construction of them as blameless victims dealing with

psychological damage helped them both to deflect projected stigma and to manage their own emotions in the context of their work.

The overall framing of victims as holding no responsibility for their choices and actions both during their victimization and during recovery contributes to a framing of human trafficking victims as having no or minimized agency. It follows then, that if victims are not responsible for their victimization then they are not to be blamed. Deflecting this blame seemed to serve the purpose of neutralizing the label by making it less stigmatizing to be a victim of human trafficking. However, because their techniques of neutralization relied heavily on a denial of agency of victims, their efforts to reduce the stigma of being labeled a human trafficking victim appeared to make the lack of agency a requirement of being considered a victim.

Service providers and law enforcement used the constructed denial of the responsibility described above as a means to neutralize the label of "human trafficking victim." By framing victims as passive recipients of abuse who had no agency at the time of their victimization, service providers are able to deflect blame and manage the stigma attached to sexual victimization. Because "victims" are generally viewed as void of agency and responsibility, service providers used the label of "victim" as a tool to reinforce this frame.

The second label that was used to support the denial of agency assigned to victims was the "survivor" label and the frame used to describe clients after they had made contact and were receiving services from an agency. Service providers almost exclusively used the label of "survivor" when describing a victim through their process of recovery. They established a frame of what it meant to be a "survivor" by using the label when emphasizing the agency and control a client has through the process of recovery. For example, one service provider emphasized her clients' agency when describing her approach to offering services. "The victim has, or better yet

the survivor, they make their own decision and they should be made a part of the decision making process." This example also shows the intentional nature of the choice to use either "victim" or "survivor" to support the frame being used. In this case, the service provider chose to correct her use of the victim label and replace it with "survivor" to emphasize that it is *survivors* who make their own decisions, not victims. In this correction we see that the framing of clients as "survivors" serves to reinforce the construction of an unagentic victim by saying that survivors have agency now that they did not have when they were victims.

Construction of the Pure Victim

Most of the language and frames used by service providers to describe victims left little room for a victim to have any agency during their victimization and still be considered a victim. This created what I came to see as the idea of a perfect or "pure" version of a human trafficking victim who had absolutely no agency, choice, or control over their situation and had made no decisions prior to being trafficked that could be seen as contributing to their victimization. While this construction seemed useful in deflecting blame, this created a significant barrier for victims to be able to self-identify as victims of trafficking. This is because women and girls who perceived themselves as having some agency and control over their lives while they were trafficked were not able to see themselves reflected in the service providers' frame.

This construction of a pure, unagentic victim is important because in my observations and interactions with clients, most women experienced and expressed some sense of agency during their victimization. To be sure, for every social agent there exists agency that is constrained by the parameters of social context. A context of abuse may well reflect extreme constraints, but not to the complete denial of agency on the part of the victimized. In this sense, the constructed notion of the "pure" victim could delimit actual victims' sense of themselves *as victims*. In my observations and interviews with clients, for example, I found that victims and the families of victims would often cite their agentic choices as reasons why they did not believe they were being victimized. For example, when one of TSP's past clients described how she was coerced into what she believed at the time was prostitution (i.e., not trafficking), she said, "Well he asked me, was I going to be working with him. And I was like, well yeah that's fine, I have no problem with working with you. Not knowing he was a pimp. So I had started doing that. Well, I didn't know how to tell him that I was ready to go home, or didn't want to do it, so I just did it."

Despite the fact that her situation met the legal definition of trafficking, she failed to identify it as trafficking because she believed she had some agency and choice during the time she was trafficked. By viewing the context of her victimization through the lens of agentic choice, this woman internalized a sense of blame but also failed to see herself as meeting the threshold of the "pure," unagentic victim. She, thus, did not initially see herself as a worthy recipient of the services provided by TSP and other agencies.

Similarly, a service provider described a situation in which a minor victim's legal guardian used the concept of choice to resist the labeling of her daughter as a victim of trafficking: "I'm working with a girl right now who...It's disputed whether or not she would fall into the trafficking category or not. I think she does. Her legal guardian disagrees and is not interested in - she, you know, says the girl made her choices and she was trying to date this guy." This mother's tension between the perception of victims as having no choice and the reality of seeing her daughter make some choices during and course of her victimization lead her to reject the label of "human trafficking victim" for her daughter. As a result, her daughter was able to receive other services as a part of a treatment program that serves a variety of needs, but was not given access to services that were specific to trafficking survivors.

While the law includes a comprehensive and inclusive definition of what constitutes trafficking victimization, the efforts by service providers and activists to destigmatize the label of "human trafficking victim" have resulted in what Sharon Lamb calls the "overpurification" of victims in her analysis of victims of domestic violence (1999). This construction of a "pure" victim has been successful in shifting public opinion about trafficking and has, in some ways, reduced the stigma attached to victims who are properly identified. However, this pure victim

construction harms a population of victims who do not fit clearly into the definition of a victim

that exercises no agency, choice, or control during the time they are trafficked.

Moral Identity Work

To understand why service providers engaged in processes of neutralization, I sought to understand who had the power to label victims and clients and who benefited from the destigmatization of the human trafficking victim label. On the surface it seemed that the beneficiaries were the survivors themselves. For victims who were successfully identified and given access to the trafficking victim specific services, the neutralization of the label positively affected their experiences by lessening the stigma associated with it. Also, by resisting the power of "human trafficking victim" as a stigmatizing label, service providers could make it more likely that victims would not resist the label, or that they would self-identify, and thus allow more people-in-need to be identified and assisted. However, when understanding the role that power plays in labeling, it became clear that the benefits identified victims enjoyed were secondary to purposes that served to benefit those who had the power to label.

The constructions of a pure, innocent victim helped service providers create and maintain "moral identities." In this, they were able to view themselves selfless and giving in their work. Sheryl Kleinnman defines moral identifies as "an identity that people invest with moral significance; our belief in ourselves as good people depends on whether we think our actions and reactions are consistent with that identity" (1996). Service providers often spoke about the fact that they found the work they did to be meaningful, and Nate spoke about building support in the community as "inviting people into doing something beautiful." Jessica commented about working with clients one day, saying, "When you go to see a client you go with the mindset that it is for them, and you go just ready to give." Service providers also spoke about trafficking victims generally as being an underserved population that was in need of their help. In describing their work as service providers Nate said, "What we do is work with individuals that are

extremely hurt, and traumatized and in need of people to walk with them" (The notion of walking together was often used to represent supporting clients throughout their recovery process) and talked about this frame as an alternative to the perception of victims as "untouchable". By portraying victims as innocent people who are especially in-need, who others are not interested in serving, service providers are able to create their own sense of having a moral identity by serving this population.

This moralistic framing of victim services is somewhat paternalistic, and is connected to a less common but present framing of victims as people, primarily women and children, who are in need of being rescued. It seemed that some service providers specifically worked to avoid this frame, others displayed it more explicitly. A few of my interview clients would use the word rescue when referring to victims stories. For example, one service provider talked about her agency's philosophy of care: "Our goal is to really restore these women from, I guess, a lot of times the women who are living in our house, they come to us straight after they've been rescued." The law enforcement official I interviewed also used the word rescue to talk about the role of law enforcement in victims' narratives. The rescue narrative and moral identity was also supported by the framing of victims as broken. In my observations, one of the other interns at TSP described victims as "broken," particularly in conversations where her intention was to frame them as moral people who were not unworthy of services. One service provider referred to victims as "quote-unquote broken" during an interview, to imply this rhetoric is something that is commonly accepted in the anti-trafficking movement. This rhetoric constructs victims as in need of protection rather than as subjects with agency and deserving of rights. This construction also serves to reinforce service providers self concepts as moral, selfless people who are rescuing and saving people who need them.

The Exception

Though the dominant frame used to describe victims was a dichotomous narrative of the unagentic victim and the moral survivor, there were two service providers that stepped outside of this binary. To do this, they constructed a concept of a trafficking victim that had agency and was responsible for actions and decisions made during their victimization, but the actual or perceived agency did not take away from their victim label or invite blame. Susan Wendell (1990) calls this perspective one of the "Responsible Actor Perspective" in which she makes a distinction between holding victims responsible for their actions and making judgments on their responsibility. Following this, she asserts that by holding victims accountable for their responsibility they will be able to recognize how (if at all) their choices contributed to their victimization, and become aware of their own power. Although this approach can walk a fine line between acknowledging victim's agentic moral authority and victim-blaming, it allows providers to address the ways that victims' experiences may not be so easily categorized or labeled.

Caroline, one of my interview participants who worked as a therapist at a facility for juveniles with mental illnesses, used the responsible actor perspective when talking about working with minor victims of trafficking who were not properly identified because they were perceived as having made decisions that contributed to their victimization. In this example, she represents the action-oriented approach of working with victims to recognize the impact of their decisions to avoid future victimization:

> They at one point were interested in developing a specific unit for victims of
> trafficking. We explored that a little bit more and what we discovered was so

many of our kids really do fit the criteria and quite frankly, a lot of the, a lot of the

PO's [Parole Officers] and legal guardians aren't interested in the kids being

labeled in that way or, you know very much blaming the victim for their decision.

making that, that wasn't going to be the most effective use our resources, but

developing a program that hopefully gets the kids to be more aware, think through

their decision making, think through their networks of support and, and make

wiser decisions, would be a better use of our time.

As Caroline noted, she struggled to hold victims accountable for their decisions without

placing blame on them for their victimization. She acknowledges that victims may make

"unwise" decisions in some contexts without suggesting that by doing so they deserve to

be victimized as a result of this. By doing this she creates a version of a human

trafficking victim that could have agency and choice in some capacity during their

victimization and simultaneously be seen as innocent and not blamed for their

victimization, while also promoting a view of survivors moving into the future who could

take active and proactive steps to promote their safety moving forward.

My field notes from my observations at TSP highlight examples of a similar

frame used to talk about clients. In a conversation with a community member who was

visiting the office, Jessica, the TSP case manager, described her experience working with

domestic victims who did not see themselves as trafficking victims : "I feel like with US

citizens a pattern that I see is that sometimes it's harder to understand. It's easier for them

to think, 'This is my decision, and I should pay for this, or I'm paying for the

consequences for my wrongdoings.' It's helpful to know that nobody should have given

them the option in the first place." Here, Jessica acknowledges that victims may often

reject the human trafficking victim label because of their own sense of responsibility and complicity but she still places responsibility for the victimization on the trafficker. In doing this she recognized that traffickers may target and prey on victims whose constrained choices make them more vulnerable. Those constrained choices, however, do not place the victim at fault or construct them as unworthy of being helped. It seemed, then, that this frame accomplished the goal of neutralizing the label and denying blame without over purifying the construction of a human trafficking victim. Instead, the responsible agent perspective taken by these service providers allowed victims to make sense of their victimization without denying any sense of agency and control they felt.

Conclusion

The interactional process through which service providers created the meanings associated with human trafficking victims through their interactions with clients, law enforcement, community members, and fellow staff highlighted the social construction of victimhood. An analysis of the function these meanings highlighted the ways that labels are enacted to serve the interests of those with the power to label. In addition to service providers accomplishing personal interests of creating a moral identity, they played the role of "norm entrepreneurs" by reproducing and communicating the larger anti-trafficking frame to the community in State City. The construction of the innocent victim directly supported the frame of trafficking as a human rights violation, but resulted in an overpurification of the human trafficking victim label.

The construction of the pure victim created a very narrow understanding of what trafficking involves. This narrow, idealistic definition is harmful because ideologies and frames established by movements can cloud the judgement of those who have the power to identify victims. While the legal definition of trafficking provides a broad framework for understanding the crime, the framing of victims as having no agency or choice makes service providers and law enforcement officials less likely to identify victims who they perceive as having some agency. This can lead many trafficking victims to be misidentified and arrested for prostitution or other crimes related to their victimization. This counterproductive result could be prevented in part by widening the discourse around what constitutes human trafficking.

The responsible agent perspective provides an alternative approach to viewing victims in a way that allows for agency without blame. While this does widen the ideological understanding of who can fit into the human trafficking victim category, its continued emphasis on individual

responsibility distracts from the root causes of human trafficking and related abuses. By focusing on agency and personal choice service providers and law enforcement obscure the reality of structural inequality make some people more vulnerable to being trafficked than others. Systems of inequality centered around race, class, gender, and sexuality create a context in which even individuals that display agentic choices are making choices under systematic constraints. Poverty and homelessness, which are significant risk factors for trafficking victimization, are exacerbated by issues of race and gender inequality. It is not surprising, then, to find that rates of trafficking are disproportionally higher for marginalized groups. The absence of discussion on the gendered nature of human trafficking erases the issues of sexism and gender inequality underlying the fact that the overwhelming majority of sex trafficking victims are women (Baker, 2013).

The absence of discussion of structural inequality in human trafficking discourse, as well as the emphasis on individualistic framing of victims, detracts from discussions on the social, economic, and political conditions that create vulnerability to trafficking. A comprehensive solution to combating human trafficking must widen the conversation and include support for policies that seek to eradicate the economic marginalization of women and children. In order to move forward in a way that empowers victims of trafficking we must focus on systemic and preventative solutions that address the needs of all victims.

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