

# Projected heroes and self-perceived manipulators: understanding the duplicitous identities of human traffickers

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**Abstract** This qualitative inquiry examines human trafficker identities through stories from convicted offenders. Thematic findings suggest that the projected-identity of sex traffickers may be different from their true self-identity. Identity regulation to produce the appropriate individual by situation facilitates both improvisational and patterned methods of victim recruitment. Sex traffickers exercise their coercive power predominately through the use of deception and fraud, projecting themselves as “honest heroes” and “lovers” of their victims. Rather than using force to perpetually repress victims, sex traffickers more frequently gain compliance by building a trauma bond with their victims, who are also typically found at the margins of society. Recruitment into a commercial sexually exploitive victimization involves the perceived fulfillment of physiological and emotional needs, as well as strategic infusion of counterculture virtues. For tenured sex traffickers, force is normally only intermittently exercised to punish recalcitrant victims in a way that maintains the longevity of control through trauma bonding.

**Keywords** Sex trafficking · Human trafficking · Commercial sexual exploitation of children · CSEC · Pimp · Prostitute · Trafficking in persons · TVPA · Trafficking victims protection act · CSAAS · Child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome · RTS · Rape trauma syndrome · Trauma bonding

Following the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, lobbyists, practitioners, academics, legislators, and law enforcement agencies have all clamored to evaluate and address human trafficking crimes in the United States. The TVPA delineates two severe forms of trafficking in persons: sex trafficking and labor

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trafficking. Sex trafficking is defined as a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [2000](#)). Labor trafficking is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [2000](#)). Nationally and internationally, human trafficking typically involves the labor or commercial sexual exploitation of women and children (OJP [2011](#)). Official estimates suggest that there are 12.3 million victims of human trafficking in the world, with as many as 300,000 children at risk of sex trafficking nationally in the United States (OJP, [2011](#)). However, a growing body of research suggests that these human trafficking prevalence estimates are questionable at best, due to a combination of methodological weaknesses and gaps in data, among a number of other discrepancies (Cwikel and Hoban [2005](#); Goodey [2008](#); Van der Laan et al. [2011](#); and Weitzer [2010](#)).

Anti-trafficking research is relatively recent, beginning in the mid 1990s with a focus on Europe and Asia. Early studies examined human trafficking business models and push/pull factors in areas such as Poland (Okólski [1998](#)), Hungary (Juhász [1999](#)), the former Soviet Union (Shelley [1999](#); and Stoecker [1998](#)); and Thailand (Phongpaichit [1997](#) and Raghu [1997](#)). Interventions in response to the human trafficking phenomenon have focused on prevention through awareness (Budiharga and Arna [2007](#); Centre for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities [2004](#); Engel [2001](#); Gopalan and Livingston [2008](#); Hagar et al. [2001](#); IOM [2008](#); UNICEF [2006](#); Valdambri [2004](#)) and education (Gilmore [2008](#) and Porumb et al. [2004](#)). However, none of these interventions are empirically supported by rigorous research (Van der Laan et al. [2011](#)). Moreover, when modeling anti-trafficking interventions in the United States after internationally developed strategies, it is important to consider whether the United States may have a different socio-political environment, which could undermine efficacy and create a need for alternative strategies. For example, victims in the United States may be perceived as having more agency to choose sex work, since they may not be as bound by circumstance as victims living in or trafficked from less developed countries (Desyllas [2007](#) and Shah [2004](#)).

In the United States, most anti-trafficking research and interventions have been implemented over the last decade. However, regardless of the mounting resources, increased public awareness, strengthened legislation, and new focus to combat human trafficking in recent years, incidents are still infrequently identified by federal and local level law enforcement (U.S. Department of Justice [2015](#)). As a result, researchers, law enforcement agencies, politicians, practitioners, and the public are all left with only a piecemeal understanding on the nature of this heinous crime.

This paper begins by discussing the limited knowledge on sex trafficking in the United States. Given the infrequency of human trafficking cases identified by state and federal law enforcement, prior research on sex trafficking is predominately qualitative in nature. Emerging themes on recruitment techniques utilized by sex traffickers suggests that research on their identities and criminal subculture could provide a framework for better understanding the clandestine nature of sex trafficking crimes. The current inquiry utilizes in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the identities and perceptions of three convicted sex traffickers: John Doe 1, sentenced to over 20 years in

federal prison for trafficking a 16-year-old girl into the commercial sex trade; John Doe 2, sentenced to life in federal prison for trafficking a 12-year-old girl into the commercial sex trade; and John Doe 3, sentenced to over 10 years in federal prison for international trafficking of multiple adult women into erotic clubs.

Although *prima facie* these three offences may seem too different to draw any cohesive finding on the nature of sex traffickers, considering that two offenders trafficked juveniles into the commercial sex trade and one offender trafficked adult women into erotic clubs, all three cases meet the aforementioned definition of sex trafficking and therefore are discussed herein in tandem. Given the clandestine nature of the crime, sex trafficking convictions are rare in the United States. For a case to conclude with a sex trafficking conviction, suggests that the offender committed this specific crime, well beyond a reasonable doubt. Ultimately, gaining additional insight on sex trafficker projected and self-identity may be an important step toward better understanding how victims are recruited, and the barriers to subsequent intervention by law enforcement.

## **Prior human trafficking research**

Despite increases in public awareness and new laws to criminalize human trafficking, the likelihood of U.S. officials actually identifying a victim and convicting an offender remains relatively low (Farrell et al. 2010). Although official estimates suggest there are approximately 300,000 victims of human trafficking in the United States (OJP, 2011), FBI Uniform Crime Report data reflects that only 300<sup>1</sup> sex trafficking offenses came to the attention of law enforcement in 2014, of which only 104 resulted in conviction (U.S. Department of Justice 2015). To put this information into perspective, while other forms of crime experience clearance rates that range from 11.9% for motor vehicle theft to 62.5% for Murder (FBI 2013), limited human trafficking prevalence estimates suggest that less than 0.01% of cases are identified, and of those identified an average of 35% are successfully prosecuted.

In evaluating why many law enforcement agencies have identified relatively few cases, Farrell (2013) analyzed data from municipal police agencies in the United States. Her research found that despite changes to legislation, police agencies might still be unprepared to identify and respond to human trafficking locally. The study concluded that due to theoretical and practical barriers with effectuating organizational change within police agencies, policy developments have not necessarily manifested into changes in practice. Since “human trafficking is a clandestine activity, victims are generally isolated from the public,” which decreases the likelihood of identification (Farrell et al. 2010, pg. 206). Additionally, victims are often unwilling to cooperate with law enforcement, in part due to their trauma bond with offenders (Clawson and Goldblatt 2007). As a result, officers may misclassify victims as offenders.

Given the small frequency of human trafficking cases encountered by police, we know relatively little about the nature of this crime and the men and women who

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, law enforcement agencies in only 32 states responded to the FBI Uniform Crime Report data collection on human trafficking. Of the 32 states with responding law enforcement agencies, 38% (12) reported zero cases of sex trafficking (U.S. Department of Justice 2015).

perpetrate these offenses. Prior research on human trafficking is predominately qualitative in nature and relies on in-depth interviews with small samples of offenders (see Troshynski and Blank 2008), victims (see Dank et al. 2014) and direct service providers (see Clawson and Goldblatt 2007). While limited in generalizability, this research suggests a disconnection between the portrayed and self-identity of offenders.

Earlier research on recruitment and control in the commercial sex industry explored tactics used by “pimps” as opposed to sex traffickers. For example, Giobbe (1992) found that a primary method used by pimps to procure juveniles for prostitution is feigned friendship and love. Similarly, Kennedy et al. (2007) found that pimps typically use one or a combination of five techniques to recruit victims: (1) love (romantic relationships), (2) debt (through extravagant introductory gifting), (3) drugs, (4) the “gorilla” technique (brute force), and (5) position of authority (parents or family) (Kennedy et al. 2007). Researchers have only recently begun to frame these commercial sex recruitment strategies within the context human trafficking.

For example, through a review of two UK police international child sex trafficking operations, involving 25 offenders and 35 victims, Brayley et al. (2011) found that one common tactic utilized by sex traffickers was to recruit new girls through existing victims. Existing victims perceived themselves as the “girlfriend” of the sex trafficker, despite regular abuse and exploitation, which facilitated trust building with new victims. According to Brayley et al. (2011) boyfriend/girlfriend myth was “deliberately fuelled by some offenders” (pg. 137). Other techniques utilized to recruit international child sex trafficking victims include: normalizing commercial sex, isolation, and cyclical patterns of abuse and positive treatment (Brayley et al. 2011). Each of these techniques concealed the true identity and intentions of the sex trafficker, while fueling the myth of his/her projected identity.

More recently, Reid (2014) conducted a review of 43 cases involving sex trafficked girls and 10 semi-structured interviews with social service providers in two metropolitan areas in the State of Florida. She found that sex traffickers in the United States similarly concealed their exploitive intentions through entrapment and enmeshment schemes, portraying themselves as boyfriends/lovers or faux family (Reid 2014). Sex traffickers also used ruses involving debt bondage or coerced co-offending to gain compliance of targets, while diminishing their credibility as victims of human trafficking (Reid 2014). Younger victims were believed to lack the psychosocial maturity to detect the exploitative motives and withstand the manipulation of traffickers.

These methods of recruitment are effective in gaining victim compliance, while diminishing their likelihood of escape and cooperation with law enforcement (Geist 2012; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). “Trafficked youth’s dysfunctional attachment to traffickers hinders identification of victims, impedes prosecution of traffickers by ensuring that victims will not cooperate with law enforcement, and perpetuates exploitation” (Reid 2014, pg. 3). Even after being rescued, law enforcement and victim service providers often see victims return to their sex trafficker (Clawson and Goldblatt 2007; Geist 2012; Reid 2014), which creates an obstacle for prosecution (Nichols and Heil 2014). Eventually, victims of sex trafficking can have their agency obscured to such a degree that they perceive themselves as consenting prostitutes (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz 2016).

The present study set forth to further explore sex trafficker identities, which can provide additional insight into the perceptions, methods of victim recruitment, and behaviors used to elicit victim compliance and noncooperation with law enforcement.

## Conceptualizing identity

Identity is how we come to recognize who we are in relation to others, which partially explains how we behave and how we expect others to behave, as well as how others perceive us and how they respond to our behaviors (Oberweis and Musheno 1999). While self-identity is generally described as being multifaceted and fluid (Jackson and Smith 1999 and Oberweis and Musheno 1999), some argue that individuals are “always and only the interactive total” of her or his identities, with “no rational actor hiding behind the scenes” choosing which identity role to play (Oberweis and Musheno 1999, pg. 900). However, other research contends that identity is self-regulated to produce the appropriate individual by situation (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Since identity can significantly affect behavior, understanding the differences between projected and true self-identity of sex traffickers can shed light on how they are able to recruit and gain compliance from victims.

Research on criminal identity suggests that offenders engage in surreptitious insubordination to social class constraints through intentional falsification of identity (Shover 1996 and Wang et al. 2004). The use of deceptive or fraudulent identities can be used to access unwitting victims and circumvent law enforcement intervention (Shover 1996 and Wang et al. 2004). Uncovering patterns of criminal identity deception can inform law enforcement interventions (Wang et al. 2004), which could potentially improve the efficacy of anti-trafficking efforts.

Moreover, the disconnection between projected and true self-identity could provide a potential explanation for the infrequent identification of sex trafficking cases, as well as misidentification phenomenon and credibility gap affecting sex trafficking victims. Direct service providers, law enforcement, and prosecutors have all remarked on the anecdotal frequency of a “trauma bond,” or Stockholm syndrome type positive attachment, between sex trafficking victims and their offenders (Clawson and Goldblatt 2007; Geist 2012; Hardy et al. 2013; Hom and Woods 2013; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). The trauma bond can create a barrier to effective law enforcement intervention, when victims fail to report their victimization and resist cooperation with law enforcement, leading to misidentification and a credibility gap in court. Better understanding the sex trafficker projected identity and commercial sex counterculture may be an important first step in explaining the counterintuitive reactions of victims, which in turn can lead to improvements in processing sex trafficking cases through the criminal justice system.

## Current study

The present study utilizes in-depth interviews, which feature stories from convicted sex traffickers, to explore their identities, perceptions, and behaviors. Stories, which are described as “figurative forms with their own logic” (Shearing and Ericson 1991, pg.



489), have been used by criminologists to successfully explore the identities and decisions of criminal justice actors, such as police officers (Oberweis and Musheno 1999). This article utilizes a similar process to explore the identities of three convicted sex traffickers: two domestic juvenile sex traffickers, colloquially referred to as “pimps,” and one international adult sex trafficker. Although the small sample size inhibited generalizations, the in-depth, longitudinal interviews with the three subjects facilitated an alternative lens for examining and conceptualizing sex trafficker identity, specifically highlighting developments in personality projections over time.

## Methods

This study began by mailing a simple written inquiry about the research to twenty-six convicted sex traffickers, incarcerated in federal prison through 2014. The twenty-six sex traffickers were randomly selected from the Michigan Law Center’s Human Trafficking database.<sup>2</sup> Of the twenty-six, three responded: two U.S. born black males and one foreign-born white male (See Table 1 for distribution on the demographics of responders versus non-responders). Informed consent was obtained from all three participants and IRB guidelines were followed in the development of open-ended interview protocol.

The author exchanged over 2000 written inquiries with the three convicted sex traffickers over the course of six months in 2013. Several themes began to quickly develop, with regards to the sex traffickers’ self-identities and projected-identities, as well as their perceptions of the commercial sex industry.

## Case descriptions

### *John Doe 1*

According to formal court documents, John Doe 1, a black male in his mid 30’s, met his victim, a 16-year old female, in a Midwestern state. For several months in 2006, he transported her for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation across at least three states. Court documents proffer that John Doe 1 raped his victim in at least one state. John Doe 1 was sentenced to over 20 years in federal prison for two charges: sex trafficking of a minor and transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity. At the time of his interviews, he was incarcerated at a medium security Federal Correctional Institution.

### *John Doe 2*

According to John Doe 2’s sentencing report, he and an accomplice sex trafficked a 12-year-old runaway girl in New York. They lured her into their car by befriending and flattering her, as well as offering her safety, clothes, and food. According to court documents, John Doe 2 then took the girl to a motel, where he plied her with marijuana and alcohol, and took pictures, while two of his older female sex workers engaged her

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<sup>2</sup> After limiting the sampling frame to offenders who were incarcerated in federal prison (through 2014) for a human trafficking offense.

**Table 1** Characteristics of convicted sex traffickers

Variable	Responder	Non-Responder
Race (n)		
Black	2	13
White	1	3
Asian	0	4
Hispanic	0	3
Sex (n)		
Female	0	2
Male	3	21
Nativity (n)		
U.S. Born	2	14
Foreign Born	1	9
Age (mean)	39	47
Sentence (mean years)	46	30

in cunnilingus. Later, he took the child victim to Washington, D.C and instructed her to prostitute herself for \$90 to \$100 per sex act.

After being rescued by law enforcement, John Doe 2's victim had no family member to retrieve her from Washington D.C. Her mother was addicted to crack, she did not know her father, and the elderly woman who had been caring for her did not have immediate transportation. Since no social service worker was available to care for her, the minor victim was sent to a juvenile detention facility, where two inmates sodomized her with a toothpaste tube. The 12-year-old victim later returned to the sex industry for support. At the time of his interviews, John Doe 2 was also incarcerated at a medium security Federal Correctional Institution.

### *John Doe 3*

John Doe 3's indictment alleged that he and his co-conspirators approached two women in Kiev, Ukraine and offered them employment opportunities as waitresses in the United States. After arriving in the United States John Doe 3 relayed a change of plans and the women were transported by bus from the East Coast to the Midwest, where they learned of their \$12,000 visa debt and \$10,000 identification document debt. In order to repay their financial obligation, they were told that they needed to work as exotic dancers. According to court documents, John Doe 3 gained compliance by controlling his victim's transportation, communication, and withholding their earnings. In his criminal complaint the women alleged that John Doe 3 threatened them if they attempted to escape. At the time of his interviews, he was incarcerated at a minimum security Federal Correctional Institution.

### *Victims*

Consenting sex workers and victims of sex trafficking can both be found in various sectors of the commercial sex industry: street prostitution, indoor brothels, massage

parlors, incall<sup>3</sup> and outcall<sup>4</sup> escort agencies, and strip clubs. There are two key variables that are evaluated to distinguish a sex trafficked victim from a consenting prostitute: (1) age and (2) agency. A person can only consent to engage in sex work if they are over the age of 18. As such, a minor in the commercial sex industry is *de facto* a victim of sex trafficking. However, for adults the key question is whether he or she chose to work in the sex industry, or whether the individual was forced, defrauded, or coerced (Desyllas 2007). This determination is more difficult and as a result consenting prostitutes can be mistakenly identified as sex trafficking victims (Weitzer 2010), while sex trafficking victims can be erroneously criminalized as prostitutes (Farrell, McDevitt, and Fahy, 2010 and Haynes, 2004).

All three of the convicted sex traffickers interviewed for this study victimized females within different parts of the commercial sex industry. John Doe 1 and 2 both victimized domestic minors through street prostitution. Since both victims were under the age of 18, agency was not a factor in determining their guilt as sex traffickers. John Doe 3, on the other hand, trafficked foreign national adults, imported from Eastern Europe to the United States, for work in strip clubs. Since all of his victims were adults, agency was a factor in determining his guilt. He was found to have used coercion, deception, threats, and force to facilitate the exploitation of his victims. In addition to their exploitation through work at the strip clubs, John Doe 3 employed similar tactics to sexually assault his victims before and after work.

## Findings

The author utilized a grounded theory approach to mining the data collected through interviews. The study began by asking convicted sex traffickers five straightforward questions: (1) Please describe your crime, (2) How did you recruit/target your victim(s)? (3) In your opinion, how can the United States effectively prevent human trafficking? (4) Why did you engage in the crime of human trafficking? (5) Why weren't you caught sooner? Following the initial inquiry, longitudinal data were collected using open-ended, unstructured questions. These data revealed repeated concepts regarding the projected and self-perceived identities of the interviewed sex traffickers.

The grounding of these concepts in the realities of the data occurred in phases. During the first phase of interviews, two themes emerged across all three sex traffickers: (1) identity and (2) sex trafficking counterculture. However, during the later interviews the first theme evolved into two separate concepts: self-identity and projected-identity, given the consistently contradictory and surreptitious changes to the expressions of identity over time.

Ultimately, the collected data suggested that sex trafficker identities can be separated into three overarching themes: (1) self-identity, (2) projected-identity, and (3) sex trafficking counterculture identity. The interviewed convicted sex traffickers all self-identified as (1) "victims" and (2) "skilled manipulators." However, this was a clear disconnection from their projected-identity as (1) "honest heroes" and (2) "lovers." As

<sup>3</sup> Client travels to sex worker.

<sup>4</sup> Sex worker travels to client.



mentioned earlier, projected identities were dominant in the answers given to questions presented at the beginning of the study, but as time progressed, what is assumed to be the true self-identity of each trafficker became more pronounced, with contradictions to the projected-identity. Ultimately, the subjects rationalized their crimes through a common understanding of the commercial sex industry counterculture aka “The Game” or “The Life,” which was perceived as being misunderstood by mainstream conformists.

### **Sex trafficker self-identification**

While all three of the convicted sex traffickers recognized their skill at manipulation, they did not perceive themselves as criminals, but rather victims.

“The Victim”.

Each of the interviewed traffickers described a lifetime of victimization, from their introduction to the commercial sex industry as juveniles to their current incarceration.

John Doe 1 explained,

*“My mother was a big time hooker. When I was growing up as a kid I lived in a house with two other hookers, my mother’s pimp, and my brother and sister. Our basement was turned into a brothel. Tricks came in day and night; I would watch my mother walk the track jump in and out of cars day and night fucking and giving blowjobs. My mother’s pimp... was my role model. As a kid he would send his prostitutes into my room at night. At the time I didn’t think of it as rape or child sexual abuse. There was young runaways, older women, and all in the house. By the age of 14 I had been to Alaska, California, Las Vegas, Texas, Chicago, and with my own eyes I seen the life that chose me. My sister got pregnant at 15-years-old, so my mother told me and my brother, who was into gangs, that we were grown enough to take care of ourselves.*

*(My mother’s pimp) gave me my first hooker and I never looked back. My sister went on welfare and I went to a motel with a runaway and an older hooker named “Big Mama.” She taught me how to pimp, have sex, how much money to take from a woman and how much not to take, she showed me how to pick up hookers, how to catch any women in the sexual business and outside of the business. Women and money became my drugs of choice.”*

Each of the sex traffickers also discussed their conviction in terms of being unfairly targeted by federal law enforcement, retaliated against by scorned women, or victimized by a prejudicial justice system.

John Doe 1 stated,

*“What you read in my case, comes from my daughter’s mother, who the Fed’s forced her and threatened her by telling her either she will help them or she will get charged. I have a 13-year-old little girl with her. Make no mistake, I in no way is happy about my past and realize that I made some bad choices. I use to carry*

*what happened to me as a kid as a reason why I did what I did, maybe an excuse, I don't know, but the reality is that I know right from wrong.*

*The girl in my case, she had a fake ID and she was under-aged. I got a pimping charge in their eyes. I consider myself a businessman and force of any kind is not what I am about. I seen my mother jump in and out of tricks cars all day, get thrown out a window and all. My mother swore before she gave me this business lesson on whores, hookers, Johns, and all inside the entertainment business, that I would never hit a working whore or force a woman to do anything against her will. Till this day I have never forced any woman. I am by no means is forceful."*

John Doe 2 similarly asserted,

*"Allow me to give you the history of my case, so that you will know why my conviction is what it reads on your computer... I was released from prison in 2002 and 9 months later 2 of my girls got arrested on the track with another girl who was working for (another pimp) around my way...because I had just been released on a pimping charge the Feds offered them all a deal to roll on me and sad to say they took it. They offered me a 10-year plea deal, I declined and used my constitutional rights to go to trial. Because I did so, the state built up a fictitious bogus case. The jury found me guilty and the judge sentenced me to life, nearly 12 years ago. (The other pimp) and the three girls are all free, hoing and pimping. The same child that I did not know. The one that the government claimed that I used to human traffic got released with her pimp to continue selling herself for the exchange of money. So in reality...WHO is the victim in your opinion?"*

John Doe 3 also argued that federal government coerced the female victims, who he described as having consensual relationships with, to testify against him.

*"I'm not trying to convince anybody. I don't go around explaining myself to people. But the people in my immediate circle know the truth and how the Feds railroaded me. You can have all the doubts in the world but it's not going to change the fact that everyone involved was a willing participant until the Feds got a hold of them and poisoned their minds. The whole case was a farce! It's ludicrous!... People used me for something my entire life, even now as I sit in prison I'm being used for someone else's freedom... You probably read my case but it's a two dimensional government version of what had transpired, my situation has a little more depth to it... It's hard to believe the government would create smoke screens and fabricate evidence. However, it happens. Everyday in courtrooms across the United States someone is getting railroaded.*

*The government doesn't care about crime prevention. If they did, they wouldn't make deals with criminals and ultimately let them walk the streets and commit other crimes. They only care about volume and the bottom line. It's a numbers game, where people become numbers in a mathematical formula. Ultimately, you*

*and I both know incarcerating people is a business. Everyone is making money on warehousing people and on prison industries. Who said slavery is over? Except now the government is the master and prisons are the plantations. Instead of physical chains they put you in mental chains. Even when you get released, you'll always carry a part of the prison within you."*

Each of the convicted sex traffickers described being products of their environment, which involved early introductions to sex and violence as children. In adulthood, although they claimed to be victims of an unfair system and scored lovers, the convicted sex traffickers each self-identified as being individuals capable of manipulation.

"The Skilled Manipulator".

According to Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT), information management is a key strategy used by deceivers to present their message as credible (Buller and Burgoon 2006). Research suggests that criminal subcultures utilize this technique to further their illicit activities without detection (Shover 1996 and Wang, Chen, and Atabakhsh, 2004). Stories from this sample of convicted criminals suggest that sex traffickers self-identify as being skilled at information management. This trait can be used to recruit and gain compliance from victims.

While incarcerated and appealing his conviction and life sentence, John Doe 2 maintained correspondence with one of his older victims. Although he was upset that she chose to testify against him during the Grand Jury proceedings, which influenced his indictment, he concealed his negative emotions from her, *"I know she went to the grand jury against me but she isn't aware that I know. As they say, never let your right hand know what the left is doing. So, that just how I play her."*

John Doe 3 admittedly utilized similar information management techniques in his interactions with female victims.

*"People think they can't be trained, but unbeknownst to them I'm actually training, shaping and molding their world view and opinion... A cunning person is very capable of making the other person believe that he/she is in control, concealing their intentions until they lead the person to the edge of the cliff."*

While each sex trafficker self-identified as being a victim and capable of gaining compliance through manipulated information management, their projected self-identification was very different. Each convicted sex trafficker claimed to be an "honest hero," who rescued his victims from worse circumstances. They also stated that they truly loved their victims, despite sexually exploiting them for money.

### **Sex trafficker projected identity**

Law enforcement and direct service providers regularly encounter victims of sex trafficking who do not view themselves as victims and in many cases decline assistance (Anderson et al. 2014; Clawson and Goldblatt 2007; Geist 2012; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). Many sex trafficking victims believe they are "in love" with their trafficker and feel compelled to return, even after being rescued by law enforcement (Brayley et al. 2011; Clawson and Goldblatt 2007; Geist 2012; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). While this

counterintuitive reaction is described as a byproduct of trauma bonding, it is also partially explained by the restricted life-choices of victims, prior to and following their commercial sexual exploitation.

“The Honest Hero”.

The emotional, physical, psychological abuse, and torture victims of sex trafficking experience often precedes their sex trafficking victimization (Mehlman-Orozco 2015). These victims are typically raised in dysfunctional environments, being “in-and-out of various parts of the social services system including private NGOs, foster homes, and runaway shelters” (Geist 2012, pp. 74–75). Even after they are rescued from the commercial sex industry, there are limited resources to assist victims of sex trafficking with housing, vocational placement, or education. Given the limited or non-existent resources for victims, sex traffickers portray themselves as “honest heroes,” who rescued America’s “disposable people.”

John Doe 3 assured,

*“One thing you can always expect from me is honesty. I don’t lie! It’s easier like that and people are drawn to you more. Cause everyone loves authenticity and genuine people. These days all people do is lie and embellish their selves. I own all mine, good or bad...People who know me know I’m a good dude. They know I’ll go out of my way for them no matter what the situation is. And I have on many levels. If I got 10 bucks in my pocket and you need it, guess what I’ll give it to you. I’m not petty or greedy. I’m generally a generous person... My honesty and sincerity, in this day and age, it’s definitely a breath of fresh air.”*

All three convicted sex traffickers remarked on the destitute lives of their victims, claiming to have improved their financial and social circumstances through trafficking. They told stories of purchasing houses, cars, and expensive jewelry for their alleged victims. However, none of their case documents provided any corroboration of physical property purchased for victims, only purchases for beauty enhancement (e.g., plastic surgery, hair styling, nail care, etc.). Falsified stories of financial betterment may be a technique used to coerce and defraud potential victims into the commercial sex industry.

John Doe 1 asserted that the 16-year-old victim from his case was “*found...in the ghetto, in a house with junkies.*” He argued that he improved her life by taking her shopping, to the hair salon, and to the doctor. He claimed to have “*bought over 10 women breast implants, nose jobs, cars, (and) houses.*”

John Doe 2’s 12-year-old victim had also fallen clutch to circumstance. At the time of her recruitment, she was a runaway living on the streets of New York. She did not know her father, her mother was addicted to crack, and she was in the care of an elderly woman, who did not properly care for her, prior to running away. While John Doe 2 denied recruiting the minor victim in his case, he generally described juvenile sex trafficking as an option for victim survival.

*“Let’s say a young girl is 16 or 17 and she has no family, money or food. So, the young lady has to fend for herself. She is already sexually active, roaming the streets, surviving. She does so with no guidance. Without proper guidance, one*

*will be reckless, but remember, she is a survivor. Willing to do whatever it takes to survive.”*

John Doe 3 told a similar story of improving the lives of his victims, by bringing them to the United States from Eastern Europe, *“The life they had with me was a 100 times better and safer. Why do you think the other girls kept coming?”* John Doe 3 stated that his victims were working at a brothel in Europe prior to being trafficked by him. He claimed that they were selling themselves to men who would abuse and beat them for the equivalent of \$100 per client. John Doe 3 justified his actions by stating that although he collected their money in the United States, they lived an above average lifestyle and they no longer needed to engage in any sexual acts for clients, only with him. He stated, *“I spent a lot of time with (victim 2), took her on vacations, took her shopping, etc. I had an ongoing relationship with her for over 2 years.”*

Domestic sex traffickers also described “rescuing” their victims from more violent traffickers, colloquially referred to as “Guerilla Pimps.” John Doe 1 and John Doe 2 explained that there are multiple typologies of domestic sex traffickers, who employ different methods for recruitment and gaining compliance (Table 2). While they may have used coercion and deception to recruit victims, John Doe 1 and John Doe 2 asserted that they did not use force, like “Guerilla Pimps.” Instead, they portrayed themselves as better alternatives and/or heroes for women under the control of violent traffickers.

According to John Doe 2,

*“You have six different types of pimps. That is in my opinion. Not all pimps, players, or macks possess the same characteristics. But, what we all have in common is a unique way of life and love for women and how they are able to use what they have to get them, and us what we need (notice I said NEED); we all need money to survive!”*

**Table 2** John Doe 2: domestic sex trafficker typology

Typology	Description
Gorilla Pimp	<i>“Beats his hoes and makes them do what he wants them to.”</i>
Understanding Pimp	<i>“Compromises with his hoes and gives them a little lead way. Personally, hoes should never be able to have any say so about nothing that a pimp says or does. At least that is how I operated.”</i>
Hard Pimp	<i>“Works his hoes until she is all worked out...Making them no good to him in my opinion.”</i>
Soft Pimp	<i>“Thinks with his dick. He just wants to fuck all of his hoes. He is weak minded if you ask me. Tricks think with their dicks, making them prey. Real pimps are not moved by a ho’s pussy or her good looks. Only the money that she can earn with her pussy, mouth, butthole, titties, and hands moves a pimp.”</i>
Money Pimp	<i>“Strictly about his paper (money). All of his hoes are part of his corporation. Money is the objective and nothing else. He may never once have sex with any of his hoes. The only thing that his penis stand at attention for is the green back currency, and the more that he has gives him the ultimate nut.”</i>
Simp	<i>“A fake fraudulent imposter.”</i>

Domestic sex trafficker typology according to John Doe 2 and confirmed by John Doe 1



“The Lover”.

In addition to portraying themselves as “honest heroes,” the convicted sex traffickers interviewed for this study continued to perpetuate the myth that they were “in-love” with their victims, despite exploiting and abusing them. Romantic love has been described by experts in the field, like anthropologist Helen Fisher, as “one of the most powerful sensations on earth” (Fisher 2004). In analyzing the physiological effects of love, researchers found that the feeling is based in the “reptilian core of the brain,” below cognition and emotion (Barber 2002; Fisher 2004, 2008). From this area, feelings of love create and disperse dopamine in a way that drives desire, motivation, focus, and craving (Fisher 2008). The feeling can possess you and make you lose your sense of self so much that you become willing to risk everything for it.

For this reason, fabricated feelings of “love” are an effective tool for conscripting victims. The trauma bond, which develops through manufactured “love,” gives the victim the perception that she or he is a willing participant, despite being exploited for the gain of the offender. Few sex trafficking victims come to the realization of their exploitation before it is too late. Even if they do, offenders use the falsified romantic relationship to transpose the mea culpa, making the victim and outside parties believe that she or he is to blame. This strategic and skilled manipulation of emotion is what effectively perpetuates the clandestine nature of sex trafficking crimes, making it unlikely for offenders to be convicted, much less incapacitated for any length of time.

While it may seem counterintuitive for a victim to stay in an exploitive and abusive situation, strong emotional attachments formed through intermittent abuse inhibits the ability for sex trafficking victims to leave exploitive relationships and increases the likelihood of returning to their sex trafficker after separation (Brayley et al. 2011; Dutton and Painter 1993; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). For example, Dutton and Painter (1993) conducted in-depth assessments with 75 women who had recently left abusive relationships. The authors found that attachments were strengthened by intermittent abuse. Alternating between aversive and pleasant conditions produced persistent emotional bonds, which were difficult to extinguish or terminate (Dutton and Painter, 1993). Qualitative research on sex trafficker recruitment methods suggests that offenders create a trauma bond with victims by fabricating positive feelings of “love” (Parker and Skrmetti 2012). In this study, convicted sex traffickers also convincingly portrayed a positive romantic attachment with their victims.

For example, John Doe 3 explained,

*To love “very much” is to love poorly; one loves that is all, it cannot be modified or completed without being nullified. It is a short word, but it contains all it means, the body, the soul, the life, the entire being. We feel it as we feel the warmth of our blood, we breathe it as we breathe air; we carry it in ourselves as we carry our thoughts. Nothing more exists for us. It is not a word; it is an inexpressible state indicated by four letters.*

*Everything I felt for them is genuine and comes from the heart!*

*No love is the same and there are different levels of love. Different feelings and emotions one experiences when one feels something for a particular person. Is it possible to love more than one person at one time and still call it love?*



*Absolutely! How can anyone say with such confidence I wasn't in love with these women? I have never waivered in my feelings for them....You cannot quantify the feeling of love through a prism of ethics and morals. It's a feeling! Love is an infinite feeling and you never know when it might overtake and overwhelm you. I just hate the fact that people are always trying insinuate that just because I'm in here I'm some kind of heartless animal.*

John Doe 2 similarly asserted his “love” for his victims and their role in his commercial sex enterprise,

*“Yes, I love everything about a woman...Something about seeing a lady of the night looking sexy, enticing, and dressing salacious turns my insides. She needs a pimp to guide her, love her, and protect her. The pimp is (the) father that she never had or the brother that she misses. He is the popular guy in school that never paid her attention in class. To her, he is what Christ is to a Christian... the blood that pumps in her heart and keeps her legs moving. A hoe was put on earth to be pimped by a pimp. Without him, there's no her. You must understand, a ho was put on earth to be pimped by her pimp!”*

In order to further sell the romantic myth between the sex trafficker and his or her victims, offenders attacked the normalized view of romantic and monogamous relationships.

### **Sex trafficking counterculture identity**

Prior research suggests that normalizing and glamorizing the commercial sex industry is one method utilized by sex traffickers to recruit new victims (Reid 2014). All three convicted sex traffickers discussed the commercial sex industry as a relationship or arrangement that is not understood by mainstream society.

John Doe 2 explained,

*Against the rules of the pimp game, I am going to enlighten you about the intriguing lifestyle of pimps, players, macks, and ho's...It takes an open-minded person to be able to fathom the life of a ho and/or pimp. The media has made the game look bad, just as they do with everything. If you truly want to know about this, please try to look at things openly, without closed eyes. If that makes sense... When a pimp recruits another female to represent him and his family (all his ladies are his family); she offers him money and buys her way into the family. I am not quite sure what you know or have heard, but I assure you this much, a true pimp is always purse first when it comes to a female. I do not care how beautiful she may look or if she is sexually enticing, she has to pay a pimp.*

*Ultimately, your noble fight to try to obliterate human trafficking is respectable, but I believe that you're NEVER going to be able to stop it. First of all, you are looking for your answers in all the wrong places. I encourage you to find you a politician to speak to. They engage in sex trafficking field more than anyone.*

*Look at it in this way... It's like a game of chess. The people that you see on the news, the ones in your computer database, and the ones in the newspaper articles are pawns. The pawns are the sacrificial lambs. The mayors, governors, and those higher up in the ranks are your knights, bishops, horses, and rooks. The President is the King and the First Lady is the Queen. Everyone is trying to protect the king. They all "know" or "engage" in sexual things concerning human trafficking. The first lady included. She knows what her husband is doing. How many times have we heard about a sex scandal going on with a politician?"*

Each of the interviewed sex traffickers described the commercial sex trade as a primordial and legitimate entrepreneurial industry. They each attempted to justify their actions by describing the sale of sex as a privately normalized and commonplace practice, although publicly demonized by mainstream society. Understanding and coming to terms with the relationship between a sex trafficker and his or her victim(s) was portrayed as a type of enlightenment. John Doe 2 explained, *"God made the female more intelligent than the male."* A female who is "enlightened" to the commercial sex trade was described as more intelligent than other women.

### **Implications for anti-trafficking efforts**

Evidence on the effectiveness of anti-trafficking interventions is severely lacking. In a Campbell Systematic Review of empirical evaluations of prevention and intervention strategies for reducing sex trafficking, Van der Laan et al. (2011) concluded that existing evaluations of trafficking interventions are mostly of poor quality, so the efficacy of these efforts is still relatively unknown. This suggests a critical need for rigorous and independent evaluations of efforts to combat sex trafficking.

At present, most interventions in response to the sex trafficking phenomenon have focused on prevention through awareness and education (Van der Laan et al. 2011). Although empirical evaluation on the efficacy of these programs is lacking, qualitative information on the recruitment strategies utilized by sex traffickers suggests that it is important for awareness and education programs to include information on the realities of sex trafficking, as opposed to the myths. Given portrayals of sex trafficking in the media, people may tend to conceptualize sex trafficking victims as being physically abused, deprived of basic physiological needs, and in chains or physically bound. Modern adverts and billboards proclaiming the abuses of sex trafficking often show images of persons in shackles and beaten, or physically restrained. However, research suggests that sex traffickers typically use nonviolent coercion, fraud, and deception to exploit victims (Geist 2012; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). As such, it is important to educate and raise awareness about how sex trafficking may not manifest with physical captivity, but rather psychological manipulation and trauma bonding.

This type of education and awareness is imperative because trauma bonding between sex traffickers and victims can inhibit law enforcement intervention on multiple fronts. Specifically, victim behaviors post law enforcement intervention can result in misidentification by police and damaged credibility in court. Given the techniques used to recruit and discredit victims of sex trafficking, comprehensive training for first-

responders and prosecutorial use of expert witness testimony are two potential tools for improving the efficacy of anti-trafficking interventions.

Additional training for law enforcement and victim service providers is needed to reduce the incidence of sex trafficking victim misidentification. Trauma bonding between sex traffickers and victims can result in coerced co-offending and uncooperative interactions with law enforcement. As a result, despite their victim status, survivors of sex trafficking continue to be erroneously arrested and detained for crimes related to their victimization, namely involvement in the commercial sex industry (Mehlman-Orozco 2015). In order to address the barriers to effective legal intervention in cases of sex trafficking, law enforcement agencies and victim service providers should be trained on entrapment and enmeshment schemes utilized by sex traffickers.

Once sex trafficking cases are accurately identified, district attorneys should consider utilizing expert witness testimony to close the credibility gap of victims. Research suggests that complainants in sexual assault cases still struggle to gain credibility in the eyes of police, prosecutors, and jurors (Ellison 2005). Subject matter expert testimony on child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome (CSAAS) (Summit 1983), rape trauma syndrome (RTS) (Burgess and Holmstrom 1974), and trauma bonding can educate jurors and restore credibility to complainants' accounts. The majority of sex trafficking survivors have engaged in behaviors that may be perceived as being inconsistent with claims that they have suffered abuse, such as coerced co-offending, failed/delayed/unconvincing disclosure, retraction, entrapment accommodation, and failed cooperation with law enforcement (Brayley, Cockbain, and Laycock, 2011; Clawson and Grace, 2007; Geist 2012; Reid 2010, 2013, 2014). Human trafficking expert witness testimony on the frequency of these behaviors among verified sex trafficking victims can educate jurors on the impact of sex trafficking victimization and the complex reactions of complainants due to the trauma bonding with their offender (Ellison 2005).

## Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative inquiry suggest a disconnection between portrayed and self-identities of sex traffickers. All three convicted sex traffickers, who were interviewed for this study, narrated their self-identity as “victims” and “skilled manipulators.” Specifically, each told stories of childhood introductions to sex and violence, while explaining their current incarceration as a form of institutional victimization in adulthood. However, despite their self-perceived identity as victims, they each revealed self-descriptions as “skilled manipulators,” by admittedly concealing and compartmentalizing information in order to gain compliance from women and girls.

Conversely, all three convicted sex traffickers narrated a projected-identity as “honest heroes” and “lovers.” Despite admittedly manipulating their female victims, each sex trafficker claimed that he truly loved his victims. Moreover, they described rescuing the sexually exploited women and girls from worse circumstances and providing them with an improved life, albeit through commercial sexual exploitation.

These thematic findings suggest that the projected-identity of sex traffickers may be different from their true self-identity. These qualitative data can be used to suggest that sex trafficker identity regulation is used to conceal intentions, which facilitates victim

recruitment and trauma bonding. This study also corroborates past research, which finds that sex traffickers exercise their coercive power predominately through the use of deception and fraud; projecting themselves as “heroes” and “lovers” of their victims. Rather than using force to perpetually repress victims, sex traffickers more frequently gain compliance by building a trauma bond with their victims, who are also typically found at the margins of society. Recruitment into a commercial sexually exploitive victimization through the perceived fulfillment of physiological and emotional needs, as well as strategic infusion of counterculture virtues, facilitates the longevity of control through trauma bonding, which in turn inhibits successful law enforcement intervention. Training law enforcement and direct service providers on entrapment and enmeshment schemes utilized by sex traffickers, as well as prosecutorial use of human trafficking expert witness testimony, are potential methods for addressing these barriers to successful legal intervention to sex trafficking victimization.

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**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest.

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