



# Psychological Perspectives on Human Trafficking: Implications for Early Identification and Victim- Centered Intervention

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## Abstract

Human trafficking represents one of the most severe forms of exploitation, often involving coercive psychological control mechanisms that operate beneath the threshold of visible violence. This article explores the psychological dimensions of human trafficking and their implications for the early identification of victims and the development of effective, trauma-informed intervention strategies. The aim of the study is to deepen the understanding of how psychological manipulation—such as grooming, dependency creation, fear conditioning, and the emergence of Stockholm Syndrome—contributes to the recruitment, retention, and silencing of victims. The article pursues four main objectives: (1) to examine the psychological tactics used by traffickers to gain compliance and suppress resistance; (2) to identify psychological risk factors and vulnerabilities—such as childhood trauma, low self-efficacy, and social isolation—that increase susceptibility to victimization; (3) to assess the psychological consequences of trafficking, including PTSD, dissociation, depression, and learned helplessness; and (4) to evaluate the barriers that impede early victim identification, particularly when victims do not perceive themselves as such or fear retaliation. Through a review of interdisciplinary literature spanning clinical psychology, victimology, and criminology, the article argues that conventional legal or procedural approaches are insufficient in the absence of psychological insight. A victim-centered framework—grounded in psychological assessment, trauma-informed interviewing, and multi-agency collaboration—is essential for improving detection and support systems. Ultimately, the paper calls for integrating psychological expertise into anti-trafficking policies and practices to better address the complex realities of victimhood and resilience.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, intervention, psychological manipulation, trauma, victim identification, vulnerability

## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking constitutes one of the most pressing violations of human rights in contemporary society, combining elements of coercion, deception, and psychological manipulation that extend beyond the traditional paradigm of physical violence (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, or abuse of power for purposes of exploitation (United Nations, 2000), trafficking represents not only a legal crime but also a profound psychological

and social phenomenon. While legal and criminological scholarship has traditionally focused on trafficking as a matter of criminal liability, transnational organized crime, and border security, psychological approaches shed light on the less visible mechanisms that sustain victim dependency and compliance over time. These mechanisms operate through subtle but powerful strategies of coercive control, including emotional grooming, fear conditioning, dependency creation, and the development of trauma bonds (Reid, 2016).

Early identification of victims remains one of the greatest challenges in both research and practice. Unlike victims of conventional violent crimes, trafficked persons often do not self-identify as victims due to complex psychological dynamics: manipulation that distorts their perception of reality, internalized feelings of guilt or shame, fear of retaliation against themselves or their families, and, in many cases, the paradoxical attachment to traffickers generated by cycles of abuse and intermittent kindness—a process often described as *Stockholm Syndrome* (Graham et al., 1994). Health professionals, law enforcement officers, and social workers frequently encounter trafficked individuals who outwardly appear compliant or loyal to their exploiters, further complicating detection and intervention (Baldwin et al., 2011).

This study seeks to bridge the gap between psychology, victimology, and law by analyzing the psychological dimensions of trafficking and their implications for early detection and intervention. A victim-centered perspective requires recognition that trafficking is not merely a legal infraction but also a profound assault on identity, autonomy, and psychological integrity. By situating psychological vulnerability at the core of analysis, this research emphasizes that effective anti-trafficking policies must move beyond prosecutorial logic to incorporate trauma-informed practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, and interventions designed to restore agency and resilience in survivors.

## **2. Literature Review**

Human trafficking has increasingly been examined through an interdisciplinary lens that combines legal, sociological, and psychological perspectives. Scholarly research demonstrates that trafficking involves a continuum of control extending beyond physical violence, encompassing tactics of psychological coercion that are designed to undermine the victim's sense of autonomy and agency (Reid, 2016). These tactics include not only overt threats and intimidation but also more subtle forms of manipulation such as the strategic use of affection, financial dependency, and promises of safety. The result is a psychological environment in which victims often perceive compliance as their only viable option.

### **2.1. Psychological Constructs of Control**

Key psychological constructs frequently associated with trafficking include trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and the development of Stockholm Syndrome. Trauma bonding refers to strong emotional attachments that develop between victims and traffickers due to cycles of intermittent abuse and reward, fostering loyalty even in the context of exploitation. Learned helplessness, originally theorized by Seligman (1972), describes a condition in which repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors leads individuals to stop attempting escape or resistance, believing that no action will alter their situation. Similarly, Stockholm Syndrome captures the paradoxical attachment victims may develop toward their abusers as a survival strategy, particularly when abusers alternate cruelty with moments of perceived kindness (Graham et al., 1994). These constructs provide a psychological explanation for the phenomenon of victim compliance that frequently puzzles law enforcement and legal practitioners.

## **2.2. Victim Vulnerability and Risk Factors**

The literature also highlights the significance of pre-existing vulnerabilities in shaping susceptibility to trafficking. Empirical studies have demonstrated that histories of childhood abuse, neglect, or disrupted attachment patterns increase the likelihood of recruitment into exploitative contexts (Ottisova et al., 2018). Low self-esteem, poor social support networks, and economic deprivation further exacerbate risk, creating what psychologists refer to as “cumulative vulnerability”. Migrant populations, undocumented workers, and individuals facing discrimination are particularly exposed to traffickers’ manipulative strategies (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Understanding these vulnerabilities is critical for developing targeted prevention and early identification strategies.

## **2.3. Psychological Consequences of Trafficking**

Beyond the factors that facilitate victimization, research has consistently documented the severe psychological consequences of trafficking. Survivors frequently exhibit high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and dissociation (Hossain et al., 2010). These symptoms are often compounded by shame, guilt, and stigma, which discourage disclosure and inhibit recovery (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Importantly, the overlap between trauma responses and perceived inconsistencies in victim testimony has created significant challenges in legal proceedings, as victims’ fragmented or contradictory narratives are sometimes interpreted as a lack of credibility (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

## **2.4. Barriers to Identification and the Need for Trauma-Informed Approaches**

Despite advances in international legal frameworks—such as the Palermo Protocol—victim identification continues to lag behind, largely due to the absence of visible signs of abuse and the complex psychological dynamics at play. Many trafficked individuals fail to recognize themselves as victims or actively resist intervention out of fear of retaliation, deportation, or further stigmatization (Baldwin et al., 2011). This highlights the limitations of conventional, law-enforcement-centered models of detection. Consequently, interdisciplinary research increasingly underscores the need for trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches that integrate psychological assessment, sensitive interviewing techniques, and multi-agency collaboration (Farrell et al., 2019). Such approaches not only improve the likelihood of early identification but also enhance the quality of long-term support for survivors.

# **3. Psychological Mechanisms of Control**

Human traffickers rarely rely exclusively on physical violence; instead, they employ complex psychological strategies that target cognitive, emotional, and behavioral systems. These strategies create conditions of dependency, confusion, and fear that undermine victims’ autonomy and perpetuate compliance. Such mechanisms are often subtle and difficult to detect, which explains why many trafficked persons remain under control even when opportunities for escape are present (Logan et al., 2009).

## **3.1. Grooming and Dependency Creation**

Grooming represents an initial phase of psychological conditioning in which traffickers deliberately cultivate trust and emotional attachment. They often present themselves as protectors, romantic partners, or benefactors who offer affection, material resources, or promises of legitimate employment (Polaris Project, 2020). This process establishes an emotional dependency that disorients victims’ judgment and diminishes their capacity to perceive risk. Over time, the victim internalizes the belief that survival and well-being are

contingent upon the trafficker's approval, which fosters compliance without overt coercion (Reid, 2016).

### **3.2. Fear Conditioning**

Fear conditioning is another critical mechanism, deeply rooted in the principles of classical conditioning (Ștefănoaia, 2015). Within this framework, traffickers deliberately establish an association between specific stimuli—such as attempts to escape, interactions with law enforcement, or expressions of resistance—and severe negative outcomes. Fear is instilled through persistent threats of physical violence, deportation, financial penalties, or harm directed at victims' families. These threats are not merely verbal but are periodically reinforced by tangible demonstrations of power, including physical assaults on peers, the destruction of identification documents, or orchestrated punishments that serve as cautionary examples for the entire group.

Over time, this conditioning process produces a heightened state of anticipatory anxiety, whereby victims begin to internalize the traffickers' control. Compliance becomes automatic, as the psychological anticipation of punishment proves sufficient to regulate behavior, even in the absence of explicit threats. This phenomenon explains why trafficked individuals may appear outwardly compliant or even cooperative during encounters with authorities, despite being under coercion (Baldwin et al., 2011). Moreover, fear conditioning contributes to a profound erosion of autonomy and agency, reinforcing the cycle of dependence on traffickers and making intervention by external actors more complex.

### **3.3. Isolation and Information Control**

Isolation is systematically employed to restrict victims' access to alternative perspectives and support systems. Traffickers may confiscate identification documents, closely monitor or intercept communication, and deliberately relocate victims to remote or unfamiliar environments where they lack both linguistic and cultural knowledge (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Such practices sever victims from their social networks, diminish the likelihood of encountering potential allies, and create an artificial dependency structure. The deprivation of external contact means that traffickers become the primary—often the sole—source of information, protection, and resources.

Beyond its physical dimension, isolation also operates at a psychological and cognitive level. Victims are frequently subjected to misinformation campaigns, distortions of reality, and selective exposure to narratives that legitimize exploitation. For example, traffickers may invoke cultural or traditional values to frame obedience as virtuous or resistance as dishonorable, thereby reinforcing compliance. These manipulative narratives resemble indoctrination techniques observed in cult-like environments, where the suppression of critical thinking and the monopolization of meaning systems are central to maintaining control (Ștefănoaia, 2015).

The cumulative effect of such isolation is twofold: externally, it drastically reduces opportunities for escape or rescue; internally, it fosters a psychological climate in which traffickers are perceived as indispensable. Victims may come to believe that survival outside the traffickers' control is impossible or more dangerous, a perception that sustains coercion without the need for continuous physical force. Thus, isolation functions as both a structural barrier to freedom and a psychological mechanism of entrapment, significantly complicating intervention and rehabilitation efforts.

### **3.4. Trauma Bonding**

Perhaps the most paradoxical mechanism of control is trauma bonding, defined as strong emotional ties that develop between victim and perpetrator through cycles of abuse interspersed with intermittent kindness. This process mirrors the dynamics of abusive intimate relationships and is reinforced by neurobiological stress responses, such as the release of oxytocin during periods of perceived safety. Trauma bonding explains why many victims defend their traffickers, resist identification as victims, or even return to exploitative environments after escape. This dynamic challenges conventional assumptions about victim behavior and necessitates specialized trauma-informed approaches in both law enforcement and clinical practice.

### **3.5. Cumulative Impact**

The interaction of grooming, fear conditioning, isolation, and trauma bonding creates a self-reinforcing system of psychological captivity. Victims internalize traffickers' narratives, develop distorted self-perceptions, and experience a narrowing of perceived choices, which collectively sustain compliance long after external control diminishes (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). The cumulative effect of these mechanisms underscores the inadequacy of purely legal or procedural approaches that assume rational victim decision-making. Instead, an understanding of these dynamics is essential for designing effective early detection tools and survivor-centered interventions.

## **4. Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities**

Human trafficking does not occur in a vacuum; it exploits pre-existing vulnerabilities that increase individuals' susceptibility to recruitment, coercion, and exploitation. Research has consistently shown that traffickers deliberately target those who exhibit psychological, social, or economic fragilities, as these conditions facilitate dependency and diminish resistance (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Such vulnerabilities operate on multiple, often interrelated, levels.

At the **psychological level**, individuals with histories of trauma, low self-esteem, or mental health difficulties may be more easily manipulated through promises of protection, affection, or stability. Traffickers capitalize on these needs by presenting themselves as benefactors or protectors, only to later convert trust into a mechanism of control.

At the **social level**, the absence of robust family support, experiences of domestic violence, community marginalization, or systemic discrimination increase exposure to traffickers' recruitment strategies. Marginalized groups—such as ethnic minorities, migrants, or individuals with limited education—face heightened risk, as their social isolation reduces access to protective networks and credible sources of information.

At the **economic level**, poverty, unemployment, and lack of viable livelihood opportunities create powerful incentives for individuals to accept risky offers of work, migration, or assistance. Economic desperation is often the entry point into trafficking situations, where initial promises of financial security quickly give way to coercion and exploitation.

Moreover, vulnerabilities tend to **intersect and compound**. For instance, a young migrant woman fleeing domestic violence may simultaneously face economic hardship, lack of legal status, and linguistic barriers—each factor amplifying her dependence on traffickers. This intersectional nature of vulnerability underscores why trafficking thrives in environments marked by inequality, conflict, and weak social protections.

Understanding these vulnerabilities is therefore crucial for prevention, early detection, and the development of victim-centered interventions. Prevention efforts must extend beyond individual awareness campaigns to include systemic measures addressing poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Similarly, victim-centered interventions require multidisciplinary approaches that provide psychological support, social reintegration, and sustainable livelihood opportunities, thereby reducing the structural conditions that traffickers exploit.

#### **4.1. Childhood Trauma and Neglect**

Histories of childhood trauma, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, or exposure to domestic violence, significantly increase the risk of trafficking victimization. Such experiences often impair attachment formation, self-esteem, and the capacity to trust others (Widom & Czaja, 2010). Survivors of early trauma may normalize abusive dynamics or perceive exploitative relationships as inevitable. Moreover, children who run away from abusive households or child protection systems are disproportionately represented among trafficking victims, highlighting the intersection between systemic failures and individual vulnerabilities (Reid, 2016).

#### **4.2. Low Self-Efficacy and Dependency Needs**

Psychological theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) emphasize that individuals' beliefs in their capacity to influence outcomes shape resilience and decision-making. Low self-efficacy predisposes individuals to accept external control, while unmet dependency needs may create a heightened desire for validation, security, or material support. Traffickers exploit these needs by positioning themselves as providers or protectors, gradually reinforcing dependency. Victims with diminished self-agency are therefore less likely to resist manipulation or pursue escape, even when opportunities arise.

#### **4.3. Social Isolation and Lack of Support Networks**

Social isolation is both a precondition and a consequence of trafficking. Individuals lacking robust family ties, community belonging, or peer support are more easily recruited and retained, as they have fewer external anchors to resist manipulation (Logan et al., 2009). Isolation also exacerbates feelings of invisibility and worthlessness, reinforcing traffickers' narratives that the victim has nowhere else to turn. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced among marginalized groups—such as orphans, LGBTQ+ youth, or individuals estranged from their families—who often experience heightened rejection or stigma.

#### **4.4. Migration Status and Economic Marginalization**

Structural vulnerabilities such as irregular migration status, poverty, unemployment, and discrimination amplify susceptibility to trafficking (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Migrant workers, asylum seekers, and individuals living in contexts of economic deprivation may be compelled to accept exploitative labor or sexual arrangements under the illusion of opportunity. Fear of deportation or legal consequences further silences undocumented victims, making them reluctant to approach authorities. Economic marginalization also intersects with gender inequality, as women and girls in impoverished regions are frequently targeted through false promises of marriage or employment abroad (UNODC, 2022).

#### **4.5. Cumulative Vulnerability**

It is important to recognize that these risk factors often intersect and reinforce each other, creating what has been described as “cumulative vulnerability” (Fong & Cardoso, 2010). For example, an individual with a history of childhood trauma who also experiences economic

deprivation and social isolation is at exponentially greater risk of exploitation than someone facing only one of these vulnerabilities. This cumulative model underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach to victim identification and intervention, one that considers the interplay of psychological, social, and structural dimensions.

#### **4.6. Implications for Early Identification**

Recognizing these vulnerabilities allows professionals—psychologists, social workers, educators, healthcare providers, and law enforcement officers—to develop risk profiles for earlier identification. Screening protocols that account for trauma histories, self-efficacy levels, social connectedness, and socio-economic status can enhance the likelihood of timely detection and prevention. Crucially, such assessments must be embedded within a trauma-informed framework that avoids pathologizing victims but instead acknowledges their resilience and agency within exploitative circumstances.

### **5. Psychological Consequences of Trafficking**

Human trafficking results in profound and enduring psychological harm that affects not only victims' immediate functioning but also their long-term ability to reintegrate into society. Survivors often experience complex trauma, characterized by the interaction of multiple psychiatric symptoms, social impairments, and identity disruptions. These consequences extend beyond individual suffering, as they also affect judicial processes, victim protection mechanisms, and the overall effectiveness of intervention programs (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

#### **5.1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

One of the most consistently documented outcomes of trafficking is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Survivors are repeatedly exposed to situations of coercion, violence, and degradation that produce chronic hyperarousal, intrusive memories, and avoidance behaviors (Hossain et al., 2010). Symptoms may include nightmares, flashbacks, and exaggerated startle responses, all of which impair daily functioning. Complex PTSD, which involves prolonged and repeated trauma, is particularly prevalent among trafficked persons, manifesting in difficulties regulating emotions, distorted self-concept, and impaired relationships .

#### **5.2. Depression and Anxiety Disorders**

Depression and generalized anxiety are highly prevalent among survivors of trafficking. Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and social withdrawal are common, often accompanied by suicidal ideation. Anxiety disorders manifest as chronic worry, hypervigilance, and somatic symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and sleep disturbances. These disorders are frequently compounded by ongoing stressors, including fear of retaliation, uncertainty about legal status, and stigmatization by communities of origin.

#### **5.3. Dissociation and Memory Fragmentation**

Dissociation serves as a psychological defense mechanism against overwhelming trauma, allowing victims to detach from unbearable experiences. However, this coping strategy results in memory fragmentation, emotional numbing, and difficulties with concentration (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). In legal contexts, such fragmented testimony is often misinterpreted as deception or inconsistency, undermining victims' credibility in court proceedings. This underscores the importance of training legal professionals to recognize trauma-related memory disruptions as clinical phenomena rather than intentional falsehoods.

#### **5.4. Learned Helplessness and Self-Blame**

Trafficked individuals frequently develop learned helplessness—a condition first described by Seligman (1972)—whereby repeated exposure to uncontrollable abuse leads to passivity and resignation. Victims may come to believe that no action can alter their circumstances, resulting in diminished motivation to escape or seek help. This state is often compounded by self-blame, as traffickers manipulate victims into perceiving themselves as complicit in their own exploitation. The internalization of guilt and shame perpetuates silence, compliance, and reluctance to participate in legal proceedings.

#### **5.5. Complex Identity and Relational Disruptions**

Beyond psychiatric disorders, trafficking profoundly alters victims' sense of identity and relationships. Survivors often struggle with stigma, social alienation, and fractured self-concepts, questioning their worth and place in society. Interpersonal trust is severely compromised, complicating efforts to form supportive relationships or engage with therapeutic services. These disruptions have intergenerational consequences, as unresolved trauma may impact survivors' ability to parent or sustain healthy attachments.

#### **5.6. Implications for Intervention**

The cumulative psychological consequences of trafficking highlight the necessity for trauma-informed judicial, clinical, and social practices. Standard approaches that overlook trauma may inadvertently retraumatize survivors, diminish their credibility in legal proceedings, and obstruct recovery. Trauma-informed care requires recognition of survivors' psychological states, adaptation of communication and interviewing techniques, and provision of long-term therapeutic support tailored to complex trauma. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration—integrating legal, psychological, and social expertise—is essential for addressing the multifaceted aftermath of trafficking.

### **6. Barriers to Victim Identification**

Despite increased awareness and strengthened legal frameworks, the early identification of trafficking victims continues to be one of the greatest challenges in anti-trafficking efforts. Barriers to detection arise from a complex interplay between victims' psychological states, structural vulnerabilities, and institutional limitations. These barriers hinder timely intervention, reduce the likelihood of successful prosecutions, and prolong survivors' exposure to harm.

#### **6.1. Victims' Lack of Self-Recognition**

One of the most significant obstacles is that many victims do not perceive themselves as victims. Psychological manipulation by traffickers—through grooming, dependency creation, and trauma bonding—distorts survivors' perception of reality, leading them to normalize exploitation or even view traffickers as protectors (Reid, 2016). Victims may internalize feelings of guilt or complicity, believing they are to blame for their situation. This lack of self-recognition reduces disclosure rates and complicates outreach by professionals who rely on victim cooperation for intervention.

#### **6.2. Fear of Retaliation and Deportation**

Fear serves as a powerful deterrent against victim identification. Survivors often remain silent due to threats of violence against themselves or their families, even when authorities are present (Logan et al., 2009). For undocumented migrants, fear of deportation or detention compounds

this silence, as traffickers frequently reinforce the idea that reporting abuse will result in imprisonment or forced return to their home country. Such fears create an environment where remaining invisible is perceived as safer than seeking protection.

### **6.3. Distrust of Authorities**

Distrust of institutions represents another critical barrier. Victims who have previously experienced stigma, corruption, or discrimination—whether in their country of origin or in transit—may view law enforcement, healthcare, or social services as unsafe or hostile (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). In some cases, victims have been criminalized themselves for offenses committed under coercion, reinforcing perceptions that authorities will punish rather than protect them. This lack of trust prevents victims from seeking assistance even when opportunities arise.

### **6.4. Limited Training Among Frontline Professionals**

Early identification depends heavily on the ability of frontline professionals—such as police officers, healthcare workers, teachers, and social workers—to recognize psychological and behavioral signs of trafficking. However, research indicates that many professionals lack adequate training in trauma-informed approaches or in the subtle indicators of coercion (Farrell et al., 2019). For example, symptoms such as dissociation, inconsistent narratives, or excessive compliance may be misinterpreted as deceit or voluntary behavior rather than signs of trauma. Without sufficient training, opportunities for timely intervention are frequently missed.

### **6.5. Structural and Procedural Gaps**

Beyond individual-level factors, systemic issues also impede identification. These include fragmented referral systems, insufficient coordination between agencies, and inadequate resources for victim screening. In many contexts, anti-trafficking efforts prioritize prosecution over victim protection, resulting in investigative practices that retraumatize survivors or overlook their psychological needs (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Structural gaps are particularly pronounced in regions where institutional trust is low and social services are underfunded, leaving victims without safe points of contact.

### **6.6. Cumulative Effects**

These barriers do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another. A victim who mistrusts authorities, fears deportation, and does not self-recognize as exploited is unlikely to disclose their situation, even when encountered by trained professionals. The cumulative effect is a cycle of invisibility that traffickers exploit to maintain control. Breaking this cycle requires a systemic shift toward trauma-informed, victim-centered practices that prioritize survivors' psychological realities over procedural efficiency.

## **7. Victim-Centered Interventions**

Given the complexity of trafficking dynamics, effective responses must extend beyond legal prosecution and incorporate psychological expertise at every stage of intervention. A victim-centered framework acknowledges that survivors are not merely sources of evidence but individuals whose safety, dignity, and agency must be protected. This perspective shifts the focus from short-term rescue operations to long-term recovery and empowerment (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

### **7.1. Trauma-Informed Interviewing**

Traditional investigative techniques often retraumatize survivors by forcing them to recount traumatic experiences in detail, sometimes in adversarial contexts. Trauma-informed interviewing minimizes retraumatization by emphasizing empathy, patience, and survivor control over the disclosure process (Campbell, 2002). Professionals trained in trauma psychology recognize that fragmented narratives, hesitations, or inconsistencies are normal responses to trauma, not indicators of deceit. Techniques such as open-ended questioning, grounding exercises, and allowing breaks during testimony help create a safer space for disclosure.

### **7.2. Psychological Assessment Protocols**

Psychological assessment plays a critical role in identifying victims' risk factors, mental health needs, and resilience capacities. Standardized tools can be used to screen for PTSD, depression, dissociation, and anxiety, while also identifying protective factors such as coping strategies and support systems (Ottisova et al., 2018). Risk and resilience assessments allow professionals to tailor interventions, ensuring that support services are adapted to individual needs rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.

### **7.3. Multi-Agency Collaboration**

Trafficking is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be addressed by a single institution. Multi-agency collaboration—integrating psychologists, law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, social workers, and NGOs—is essential to ensure holistic responses (Farrell, Owens, & McDevitt et al., 2019). Psychologists can assist law enforcement by explaining trauma-related behaviors, while social workers provide reintegration services, and NGOs offer safe housing and legal advocacy. Such coordinated networks reduce the risk of fragmented care and increase the likelihood of sustainable recovery.

### **7.4. Long-Term Therapeutic Support**

Short-term interventions, while necessary, are insufficient to address the enduring psychological consequences of trafficking. Survivors often require long-term therapeutic support that addresses PTSD, depression, and dissociation, while also facilitating identity reconstruction and empowerment (Hossain et al., 2010). Therapeutic approaches may include:

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** to restructure self-blame and distorted cognitions.
- **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)** for processing traumatic memories.
- **Group therapy** to reduce isolation and foster solidarity among survivors.
- **Empowerment-based interventions**, focusing on rebuilding autonomy, vocational training, and self-efficacy.

### **7.5. Restoring Agency and Dignity**

A victim-centered framework places survivors at the core of decision-making, ensuring that interventions do not replicate patterns of coercion. Survivors are given choices regarding their participation in investigations, therapeutic programs, and reintegration processes. Restoring agency and dignity is essential not only for psychological healing but also for preventing revictimization and fostering resilience (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

## **7.6. Implications for Policy and Practice**

Integrating psychological expertise into anti-trafficking efforts requires systemic change:

- **Training programs** for law enforcement and judicial actors on trauma-informed practices.
- **Funding for long-term mental health care** rather than short-term crisis interventions.
- **Legislative frameworks** that protect victims from penalization for crimes committed under coercion.
- **Cross-border cooperation** ensuring continuity of care for migrant victims.

By embedding psychological insights into both practice and policy, anti-trafficking interventions can move beyond reactive measures and foster environments where survivors are empowered to heal and rebuild their lives.

## **8. Methodology of Research**

### **8.1. Research Aim**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the psychological dimensions of human trafficking and assess their implications for the early identification of victims and the development of victim-centered intervention strategies. By foregrounding psychological manipulation and trauma responses, the research seeks to highlight the necessity of integrating psychological expertise into anti-trafficking practices and policies.

### **8.2. Research Objectives**

The study pursues four interrelated objectives:

1. To analyze the psychological tactics employed by traffickers—such as grooming, dependency creation, and fear conditioning—that facilitate victim compliance and silence.
2. To identify risk factors and vulnerabilities (e.g., childhood trauma, low self-efficacy, and social isolation) that heighten susceptibility to trafficking.
3. To examine the psychological consequences of trafficking, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociation, depression, and learned helplessness.
4. To evaluate barriers to early identification stemming from victims' misperceptions of their situation, fear of retaliation, or distrust of authorities.

### **8.3. Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary design, structured as a conceptual and literature-based investigation. A narrative literature review was employed to synthesize findings across clinical psychology, victimology, and criminology. This design was selected to capture the complexity of trafficking as both a psychological and socio-legal phenomenon. The methodological approach emphasizes theoretical integration rather than empirical data collection, with the purpose of generating a comprehensive framework for understanding psychological manipulation in trafficking contexts.

The research design follows four stages:

1. Collection of interdisciplinary sources from peer-reviewed journals, reports by international organizations (e.g., UNODC, WHO), and psychological case studies.
2. Thematic analysis to identify recurring psychological mechanisms and vulnerabilities.

3. Comparative evaluation of legal-procedural versus psychological approaches to victim identification.
4. Synthesis of implications for intervention, with a focus on trauma-informed, victim-centered strategies.

#### 8.4. Research Questions

Guided by the stated objectives, the study addresses the following research questions (RQs):

***RQ1:** What psychological control mechanisms do traffickers employ to gain compliance and suppress resistance among victims?*

Traffickers employ a range of psychological control mechanisms that are designed to undermine victims' autonomy, distort their perception of reality, and ensure compliance even in the absence of constant physical violence. Research indicates that these mechanisms target both the cognitive and emotional domains, producing long-lasting effects that resemble coercive control in intimate partner violence and cult indoctrination (Reid, 2016; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

First, grooming and dependency creation are fundamental tactics. By offering initial affection, protection, or material benefits, traffickers cultivate emotional bonds that foster dependency and diminish critical judgment (Polaris Project, 2020). Victims often come to perceive traffickers as protectors or providers, which blurs the distinction between exploitation and care.

Second, fear conditioning is used to suppress resistance. Threats of violence—directed at victims or their families—condition survivors to comply automatically, as the anticipation of punishment becomes sufficient to deter defiance. Occasional demonstrations of brutality reinforce the credibility of these threats (Logan et al., 2009).

Third, isolation prevents victims from accessing alternative perspectives or seeking assistance. This involves physical separation from family and community, as well as cognitive isolation through misinformation or control of communication. Isolation intensifies dependency and reduces opportunities for disclosure (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Finally, trauma bonding represents one of the most paradoxical mechanisms. Cycles of abuse interspersed with moments of kindness create powerful emotional attachments between trafficker and victim (Dutton & Painter, 1993). This bond is reinforced by neurobiological stress responses, leading victims to rationalize or even defend their abusers.

Together, these mechanisms form a self-reinforcing system of psychological captivity, ensuring compliance long after physical coercion has subsided. By manipulating fear, dependency, and attachment, traffickers create conditions where victims perceive resistance as futile or even dangerous.

***RQ2:** Which psychological vulnerabilities increase the risk of victimization in human trafficking?*

Early adversity: Childhood abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, disrupted attachment; these weaken trust and increase tolerance for coercive bonds (Widom & Czaja, 2010; Ottisova et al., 2018).

Low self-efficacy/self-esteem & dependency needs: Reduced belief in one's ability to effect change heightens susceptibility to external control and "rescuer" narratives (Bandura, 1997).

Social isolation & weak support networks: Runaway/homeless youth, institutional care leavers, estrangement from family/peers (Logan et al., 2009).

Structural marginalization: Irregular migration status, poverty/debt, discrimination; fear of authorities/deportation amplifies exploiter leverage (Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Pre-existing mental health/substance problems and neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities: These can impair risk appraisal and increase dependency.

Cumulative risk: Co-occurrence of the above factors predicts markedly higher susceptibility (“cumulative vulnerability”) (Fong & Cardoso, 2010).

**RQ3:** *What are the predominant psychological consequences of trafficking, and how do they shape victims’ behavior and self-perception?*

One of the most severe and frequently documented psychological effects of human trafficking is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which manifests through intrusive memories, hyperarousal, and avoidance behaviors. In its complex form, resulting from prolonged and repeated exposure to trauma, PTSD is accompanied by emotion dysregulation, a pervasive negative self-concept, and significant impairments in interpersonal functioning (Hossain et al., 2010; Cloitre et al., 2012).

Closely linked to these symptoms are depression and anxiety disorders, which are characterized by persistent hopelessness, anhedonia, and hypervigilance. Such conditions are often compounded by ongoing threats from traffickers, legal uncertainty, and the stigma survivors encounter within their communities (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Another critical consequence is dissociation, a protective psychological mechanism that enables victims to detach from overwhelming experiences. While adaptive in the moment, dissociation frequently results in fragmented or inconsistent memories, which are easily misinterpreted as deceit or fabrication in legal settings (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

Equally significant is the emergence of learned helplessness and self-blame. As survivors are repeatedly subjected to uncontrollable harm, they may develop a sense of futility, passivity, and resignation. This state of psychological captivity is often reinforced by traffickers’ manipulation, leading victims to internalize guilt and perceive themselves as complicit in their own exploitation (Seligman, 1972).

Together, these psychological consequences profoundly shape survivors’ behavior and self-perception. They may display excessive compliance, recant their testimony, minimize their experiences, or even return to traffickers. Distrust of helpers, diminished agency, pervasive shame, and disturbances of identity further increase the risk of re-victimization, highlighting the urgent need for trauma-informed judicial and therapeutic practices.

**RQ4:** *What barriers impede early identification of trafficking victims, particularly in cases where victims do not recognize themselves as such?*

Early identification of trafficking victims is consistently undermined by a combination of psychological, social, and institutional barriers that prevent survivors from disclosing their exploitation or being recognized by professionals. One of the most significant obstacles is that many victims do not recognize themselves as victims. Traffickers deliberately distort victims’ perception of reality through grooming, dependency creation, and trauma bonding, leading survivors to normalize abuse or even interpret exploitation as protection or affection. This lack of self-recognition is further reinforced by internalized feelings of guilt and shame, which create the illusion of complicity and silence disclosure (Reid, 2016).

Another powerful barrier is fear of retaliation and deportation. Survivors are often threatened with violence against themselves or their families, and for undocumented migrants, the fear of detention or deportation makes reporting exploitation appear more dangerous than remaining

silent (Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009). These fears are frequently amplified by traffickers' manipulation, who portray authorities as hostile and untrustworthy.

Equally critical is the distrust of institutions. Many victims, especially those from marginalized or migrant communities, have previous experiences of stigma, corruption, or even criminalization for offenses committed under coercion. This leads to a perception that engagement with authorities will result in punishment rather than protection (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Consequently, victims may avoid seeking help even when they come into contact with professionals.

Institutional limitations further exacerbate these individual-level barriers. Frontline professionals often lack adequate training in recognizing psychological indicators of trafficking. Signs such as dissociation, inconsistent narratives, or excessive compliance may be misinterpreted as deceit, voluntary involvement, or simple non-cooperation, rather than understood as trauma-related phenomena (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). In addition, fragmented referral systems and insufficient inter-agency collaboration frequently result in missed opportunities for intervention (Farrell et al., 2019).

Taken together, these barriers create a cycle of invisibility in which survivors remain hidden, traffickers maintain control, and opportunities for timely protection are lost. Breaking this cycle requires systemic change: trauma-informed training for professionals, legislative safeguards that protect victims from criminalization, and integrated multi-agency approaches that prioritize survivors' psychological realities alongside legal objectives.

***RQ5:** How can a victim-centered framework, informed by psychological expertise, improve the effectiveness of identification and intervention strategies?*

A victim-centered framework, when informed by psychological expertise, has the potential to transform both the identification of trafficking victims and the effectiveness of subsequent interventions. Traditional approaches often treat survivors primarily as witnesses in criminal proceedings, prioritizing evidentiary needs over psychological well-being. This narrow perspective not only risks retraumatizing victims but also undermines their willingness to engage with authorities. By contrast, a victim-centered approach recognizes survivors as individuals with complex psychological needs and situates their safety, dignity, and agency at the core of all procedures.

One of the most significant contributions of psychological expertise lies in the development of trauma-informed interviewing techniques. These methods help professionals avoid retraumatization by creating a safe environment for disclosure, pacing conversations according to survivors' readiness, and recognizing that fragmented or inconsistent narratives are common trauma responses rather than indicators of deceit (Campbell, 2002). Such adaptations not only improve victims' experience but also enhance the reliability of the information gathered.

Psychological expertise also contributes to more precise risk and resilience assessments. Through standardized tools, clinicians can identify symptoms of PTSD, depression, and dissociation, as well as protective factors that may facilitate recovery. This enables tailored interventions that move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and instead provide individualized pathways to healing and reintegration (Ottisova et al., 2018).

Equally important is the facilitation of multi-agency collaboration. Psychologists play a bridging role between law enforcement, healthcare providers, social workers, and NGOs, ensuring that responses are not fragmented but instead holistic and coordinated. By contextualizing victims' behaviors—such as withdrawal, compliance, or recantation—

psychological input helps other professionals interpret actions through a trauma lens rather than mislabeling them as non-cooperation (Farrell et al., 2019).

Finally, a victim-centered framework emphasizes the provision of long-term therapeutic support, addressing not only acute psychiatric symptoms but also deeper issues of identity reconstruction, empowerment, and resilience. Restoring survivors' sense of agency is critical for preventing re-victimization and enabling sustainable reintegration into society (Hossain et al., 2010).

In sum, integrating psychological expertise into anti-trafficking strategies ensures that identification is more accurate, interventions are more humane, and long-term recovery is prioritized alongside justice. Such an approach not only benefits survivors but also strengthens the overall effectiveness of anti-trafficking systems by fostering trust, cooperation, and resilience.

## **9. Discussion and Conclusions**

This study highlights the indispensability of psychological insights in the fight against human trafficking. Whereas traditional legal approaches have often emphasized evidentiary standards and the prosecution of traffickers, they have largely overlooked the complex psychological dynamics that sustain victim compliance, silence, and even loyalty to exploiters. By addressing the five guiding research questions (RQ1–RQ5), this paper demonstrates that the integration of psychological knowledge into anti-trafficking efforts is not an optional complement, but a fundamental necessity.

**RQ1 explored the psychological mechanisms traffickers employ to secure compliance.** Findings confirm that grooming, fear conditioning, isolation, and trauma bonding function as invisible chains that bind victims as effectively as physical restraints. These mechanisms erode autonomy, foster dependency, and explain why many survivors do not attempt escape even when opportunities arise. They also demonstrate that coercion in trafficking should be understood as a continuum of psychological as well as physical control, requiring legal systems to expand their conceptualization of force and consent.

**RQ2 addressed the vulnerabilities that heighten susceptibility to trafficking.**

Evidence shows that childhood trauma, low self-efficacy, social isolation, and migration-related marginalization converge to create conditions of heightened risk. Importantly, these vulnerabilities rarely act in isolation but accumulate to form what scholars describe as “cumulative vulnerability.” This recognition has significant implications for prevention strategies: at-risk populations can be identified earlier through screening protocols in schools, social services, and healthcare, if psychological and social indicators are properly integrated.

**RQ3 examined the psychological consequences of trafficking and their impact on behavior and self-perception.**

Survivors experience profound and enduring harm, including PTSD and complex PTSD, depression, anxiety, dissociation, learned helplessness, and pervasive self-blame. These conditions distort self-perception, erode agency, and complicate participation in legal proceedings, as fragmented testimony and excessive compliance are often misinterpreted as deceit or unwillingness to cooperate. The findings emphasize that without trauma-informed understanding, victims' credibility is unjustly questioned and their access to justice severely compromised.

**RQ4 investigated the barriers to victim identification.**

Results indicate that psychological manipulation, fear of retaliation, distrust of authorities, and inadequate professional training form an interlocking system that silences victims and obscures signs of exploitation. The fact that many survivors do not self-identify as victims underscores the limitations of purely procedural approaches to detection. Early identification requires professionals to look beyond surface behaviors, recognizing that apparent consent or loyalty may in fact reflect trauma bonding and learned helplessness.

**RQ5 explored how a victim-centered framework informed by psychological expertise can improve identification and intervention.**

A trauma-informed approach—grounded in empathetic interviewing, psychological assessment, and long-term therapeutic care—emerges as essential for supporting survivors. Multi-agency collaboration that incorporates psychologists alongside law enforcement, social workers, and NGOs ensures holistic responses that address not only safety and justice, but also psychological recovery and empowerment. Such a framework restores agency and dignity to survivors, enhancing both their well-being and their willingness to cooperate with protective and legal processes.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the conclusion that conventional anti-trafficking strategies are insufficient without psychological integration. Trafficking is not only a criminal enterprise but also a profound assault on identity, autonomy, and mental health. Policies that fail to account for psychological vulnerability risk perpetuating cycles of exploitation and re-victimization. Conversely, interventions that embed psychological expertise at every stage—from risk assessment and identification to therapeutic support and reintegration—can significantly improve outcomes.

In conclusion, this study calls for a paradigm shift in anti-trafficking practice: from a prosecution-centered model to a victim-centered framework that acknowledges and addresses the psychological realities of exploitation. By bridging the disciplines of psychology, victimology, and criminology, such an approach has the potential not only to enhance early identification and strengthen legal processes but also to foster survivors' long-term resilience, empowerment, and reintegration into society.

## **10. Theoretical Implications**

The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of human trafficking by situating it within broader frameworks of coercive control, psychological manipulation, and vulnerability theory. First, the analysis underscores that trafficking is not merely an economic or criminal phenomenon but also a psychosocial process shaped by fear conditioning, isolation, and exploitation of pre-existing fragilities. This perspective enriches existing literature on coercion by demonstrating how classical conditioning and indoctrination mechanisms operate in trafficking contexts, comparable to those found in cultic groups or abusive relationships.

Second, the study advances the theoretical dialogue on intersectionality in vulnerability. By showing how psychological, social, and economic risk factors interconnect, it highlights the need for multi-layered theoretical models that capture the dynamic interplay between individual characteristics and structural inequalities.

Finally, these insights contribute to criminological and psychological theories of victimization by framing trafficking not as a static condition of victimhood but as a dynamic process, where vulnerabilities are deliberately manipulated to sustain long-term dependency and control.

### **10.1. Practical Implications**

From a practical standpoint, the study informs prevention, intervention, and policy strategies in several ways. First, prevention efforts must target the reduction of vulnerabilities through poverty alleviation, access to education, and strengthening of community support networks. Policies that reduce social marginalization and discrimination directly mitigate the conditions that traffickers exploit.

Second, the findings call for victim-centered interventions that go beyond immediate rescue to include psychological counseling, trauma-informed care, and empowerment programs that rebuild autonomy and resilience. Understanding fear conditioning and isolation as central mechanisms suggests that rehabilitation requires not only legal and material support but also structured therapeutic strategies to address learned helplessness and trauma bonding.

Third, at the policy and law enforcement level, the results highlight the importance of training professionals to recognize signs of psychological coercion and compliance under duress. Outward cooperation of victims with traffickers should not be misinterpreted as genuine consent, but rather as a conditioned response.

Lastly, international cooperation is essential. Addressing the economic and structural inequalities that feed trafficking requires coordinated policies across borders, integrating human rights protections with labor, migration, and social welfare frameworks.

## **11. Limitations and Future Research**

Like all scholarly work, this study has inherent limitations that must be acknowledged in order to contextualize its findings. First, the article is primarily conceptual and literature-based, relying on the synthesis of existing interdisciplinary research rather than original empirical data. While this approach allows for the integration of psychological, criminological, and victimological perspectives, it also limits the generalizability of conclusions. The absence of first-hand data from survivors means that the nuances of lived experiences could not be directly captured, and some theoretical insights remain speculative until validated empirically.

Second, the literature reviewed predominantly reflects studies conducted in Western contexts, particularly North America and Western Europe. Although global perspectives were included where available, cultural, social, and legal differences may influence both the mechanisms of trafficking and the effectiveness of interventions. Consequently, cross-national and cross-cultural research is needed to ensure that the frameworks proposed here are adaptable to diverse contexts, especially in regions where trafficking patterns and victim support infrastructures differ substantially.

Third, while this article underscores the importance of psychological expertise in judicial processes, it does not empirically evaluate how courts currently integrate—or fail to integrate—psychological evidence. Systematic studies examining judicial reasoning, the weight given to trauma-informed testimony, and the admissibility of psychological assessments are essential for understanding gaps between theoretical recommendations and legal practice.

In terms of future research, several directions emerge as particularly important. Empirical studies involving survivor narratives are necessary to ground theoretical claims in lived realities, capturing both the diversity of victim experiences and the variability of coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the development and validation of psychological assessment tools tailored specifically for trafficking contexts could enhance early identification and guide individualized intervention strategies.

Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to examine the outcomes of trauma-informed interventions over time. Understanding how survivors' psychological health evolves in response to different therapeutic approaches, legal processes, and social reintegration programs would provide critical evidence for refining best practices. Comparative studies across countries and legal systems could also illuminate how structural, cultural, and policy factors shape both victim experiences and institutional responses.

Finally, future research should pay closer attention to interdisciplinary collaboration models, evaluating how integrated frameworks that involve psychologists, law enforcement, social workers, and NGOs can be operationalized effectively. Examining both the successes and challenges of multi-agency practices would yield practical insights into how theoretical recommendations can be translated into sustainable systemic change.

In sum, while this article contributes to the conceptual understanding of psychological dimensions in trafficking, its limitations highlight the need for robust empirical inquiry. Advancing research in these directions will not only validate and refine theoretical frameworks but also strengthen the capacity of anti-trafficking systems to protect, empower, and reintegrate survivors.

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