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A Comparative Analysis of the Psychological Profiles of Cooperative and Non-Cooperative Victims in Human Trafficking Proceedings: A Proposed Trauma-Informed Study

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Abstract

This study advances a comparative forensic psychological analysis of cooperative and non-cooperative victims in human trafficking proceedings, examining the psychological determinants that influence procedural engagement. While victim cooperation is frequently interpreted through a legal or strategic lens, empirical and clinical evidence suggests that testimonial behavior is profoundly shaped by trauma-related symptomatology, coercive control and attachment dynamics developed during exploitation. The research investigates key variables, including complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), dissociation, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, attachment style, perceived threat severity and internalized shame. Particular attention is given to the distinction between trauma-based incapacity to cooperate and externally driven non-cooperation resulting from intimidation, dependency or socio-economic vulnerability. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What psychological differences can be identified between cooperative and non-cooperative victims in human trafficking cases? (2) To what extent do trauma-related symptoms predict levels of procedural cooperation? (3) How does trauma bonding influence victims' willingness to provide consistent and sustained testimony? (4) Can specific psychological indicators serve as reliable predictors of testimonial variability without undermining victim credibility? The study is currently in progress, and the proposed methodology is expected to provide a rigorous framework for the empirical investigation. Methodologically, a mixed-method design is proposed, integrating standardized forensic psychological assessments, validated trauma inventories and qualitative analysis of judicial case files. The expected findings aim to refine trauma-informed investigative practices and contribute to a more accurate interpretation of victim behavior in court. By clarifying the psychological correlates of cooperation, the study seeks to prevent misjudgments of credibility and reduce the risk of secondary victimization in trafficking prosecutions.

Keywords: human trafficking, forensic psychology, victim cooperation, trauma bonding, complex PTSD, dissociation, coercive control, testimonial credibility, secondary victimization, trauma-informed interviewing

1. Introduction

Human trafficking constitutes a complex form of exploitation involving the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, coercion, deception, abuse of power, or abuse of a position of vulnerability for exploitative purposes (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). Victims may be subjected to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, criminal exploitation, forced begging and organ removal (International Labour Organization [ILO], Walk Free Foundation, & International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). Beyond its legal definition, human trafficking represents a profound violation of human rights that often results in severe psychological, physical, and social consequences for victims (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

A persistent challenge in trafficking investigations and prosecutions concerns the considerable variation in victims' willingness to cooperate with authorities. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judicial professionals frequently expect victims who have been identified and removed from exploitative environments to readily disclose their experiences and actively support criminal proceedings. However, empirical research consistently demonstrates that many trafficking victims decline assistance, retract statements, fail to appear in court, minimize their victimization or even actively defend their traffickers (Farrell et al., 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Such behaviors often create significant obstacles for criminal investigations and may contribute to lower prosecution and conviction rates in trafficking cases.

Historically, victim non-cooperation was sometimes interpreted as evidence of deception, complicity, criminal involvement, or lack of genuine victimization (Brennan, 2014). These assumptions were often reinforced by stereotypes regarding how a "true victim" should behave following rescue or identification. Contemporary trauma-informed approaches, however, challenge these interpretations by emphasizing the psychological impact of prolonged coercion, manipulation, dependency and traumatic bonding on victims' decision-making processes (Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006; Reid, 2016). From this perspective, both cooperation and non-cooperation may be understood as adaptive responses developed within highly controlling and exploitative environments.

Research suggests that trafficking victims frequently experience complex trauma characterized by repeated interpersonal victimization, chronic fear, emotional dependency, learned helplessness, dissociation and disturbances in self-concept and interpersonal functioning (Ottisova et al., 2016; Oram et al., 2012). These psychological consequences can significantly influence victims' perceptions of risk, trust in authorities, readiness to disclose abuse, and willingness to participate in legal proceedings. Factors such as fear of retaliation, concerns for family safety, cultural beliefs, immigration status, economic dependency, shame, self-blame, and trauma bonding may contribute to reluctance to cooperate even when victims have been removed from immediate exploitation (Baldwin et al., 2015; Reid, 2016).

At the same time, some trafficking victims actively engage with support services and judicial authorities, demonstrating greater readiness to disclose traumatic experiences and participate in prosecution efforts. Emerging evidence indicates that cooperative and non-cooperative victims may differ in certain psychological characteristics, including levels of trauma symptomatology, perceived self-efficacy, trust in institutions, coping strategies, resilience and social support (Farrell et al., 2019; Macy & Johns, 2011). Nevertheless, both groups often share common experiences of coercion, psychological manipulation, and trauma exposure, suggesting that cooperation should not be considered a reliable indicator of victimization severity or credibility.

Understanding the psychological profiles associated with cooperation and non-cooperation is particularly important in forensic and judicial settings, where victim behavior may influence credibility assessments, investigative strategies, and legal outcomes. A nuanced understanding of these profiles can assist professionals in avoiding erroneous assumptions, reducing secondary victimization and implementing trauma-informed practices that facilitate engagement while respecting victims' autonomy (Office for Victims of Crime, 2020; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

Accordingly, this article presents a comparative analysis of the psychological characteristics of cooperative and non-cooperative victims in human trafficking proceedings. It examines the similarities and differences between these groups, explores the psychological mechanisms that may underlie their responses to authorities, and discusses the implications of these findings for forensic assessment, victim support, and judicial decision-making.

2. Psychological Consequences of Human Trafficking

Before examining the differences between cooperative and non-cooperative victims, it is essential to recognize the psychological consequences commonly observed among survivors of human trafficking. A substantial body of research indicates that trafficking victims experience high rates of mental health difficulties resulting from prolonged exposure to coercion, exploitation, violence and chronic stress (Oram et al., 2012; Ottisova et al., 2016).

Among the most frequently reported psychological outcomes is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Trafficking survivors often experience intrusive memories, nightmares, avoidance behaviors, emotional numbing and persistent hyperarousal following exposure to repeated traumatic events (Oram et al., 2012). In many cases, the nature of trafficking-related victimization extends beyond single traumatic incidents and involves sustained interpersonal abuse, making complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) particularly relevant. Complex PTSD is characterized not only by the core symptoms of PTSD but also by disturbances in emotional regulation, self-concept and interpersonal relationships (Herman, 1992; World Health Organization, 2019).

Depression and anxiety disorders are also highly prevalent among trafficking victims. Survivors frequently report persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in daily activities, excessive worry, panic symptoms and feelings of worthlessness (Ottisova et al., 2016). These symptoms may persist long after victims have exited trafficking situations and can significantly impair their ability to engage with support services or legal processes.

Another common psychological consequence is dissociation, a defensive response that allows individuals to psychologically detach from overwhelming experiences. Dissociative symptoms may include depersonalization, derealization, emotional numbness, memory fragmentation and difficulties recalling traumatic events accurately (Spiegel et al., 2013). Such symptoms are particularly relevant in forensic settings, where fragmented or inconsistent testimony may be mistakenly interpreted as deception rather than as a consequence of trauma.

Many trafficking survivors also exhibit elevated rates of substance abuse, often as a coping mechanism for managing emotional distress, traumatic memories and ongoing psychological suffering (Hossain et al., 2010). In some cases, traffickers deliberately encourage or enforce substance use as a means of increasing dependency and control.

The concept of learned helplessness, originally described by Seligman (1975), provides an important framework for understanding the behavior of trafficking victims. Repeated exposure to uncontrollable abuse may lead individuals to perceive escape attempts or resistance as futile,

resulting in passivity, resignation and reduced motivation to seek help. This phenomenon may persist even after victims have been physically removed from exploitative environments.

Victims frequently experience significant emotional dysregulation, including difficulties managing fear, anger, sadness and shame (Cloitre et al., 2013). Emotional responses may appear unpredictable or disproportionate to observers, yet they often reflect adaptive survival strategies developed in response to chronic trauma. Similarly, many survivors live with chronic fear and hypervigilance, remaining constantly alert to potential threats even in objectively safe environments. Fear of retaliation against themselves or their families is particularly common among trafficking victims and may strongly influence their willingness to cooperate with authorities (Reid, 2016).

In addition to psychological symptoms, trafficking survivors often report a wide range of somatic complaints, including chronic pain, headaches, gastrointestinal problems, sleep disturbances, fatigue and other medically unexplained symptoms (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). These physical manifestations frequently reflect the interaction between psychological trauma and physiological stress responses.

Trafficking experiences may also disrupt victims' capacity to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Attachment disturbances often emerge when traffickers alternate between abuse and intermittent displays of care, creating confusion regarding trust, dependency and emotional security (Freyd, 1996). Such dynamics can contribute to the development of trauma bonds, which may persist even after exploitation has ended.

Finally, many survivors experience profound shame and self-blame. Victims may internalize responsibility for their exploitation due to manipulation by traffickers, societal stigma, cultural beliefs, or misconceptions regarding consent and choice (Herman, 1992). These feelings often inhibit disclosure and contribute to reluctance in seeking assistance or participating in criminal proceedings.

Taken together, these psychological consequences underscore the importance of interpreting victim behavior within a trauma-informed framework. Human trafficking survivors are often subjected to prolonged exposure to violence, threats, deprivation, sexual abuse, coercive control, manipulation and psychological domination. Consequently, behaviors observed during investigations—such as reluctance to disclose information, inconsistent statements, emotional detachment, withdrawal or refusal to cooperate—cannot be accurately understood without considering the profound impact of trauma. Recognizing these trauma-related responses is essential for avoiding misinterpretations of victim credibility and for ensuring fair, effective and victim-centered judicial practices (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020).

3. The Cooperative Victim: Psychological Characteristics

Definition

A cooperative victim is generally understood as a trafficked person who actively engages with law enforcement, judicial authorities and support services during the post-identification phase. Cooperation may involve disclosing experiences of exploitation, providing witness statements, participating in investigations, accepting protective interventions and maintaining engagement throughout criminal proceedings (Farrell et al., 2019; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020). Importantly, cooperation should not be viewed as a static characteristic. While some victims disclose their experiences immediately after identification, others become cooperative only after a period of stabilization, safety, and psychological support. Consequently, cooperation is

best conceptualized as a dynamic process influenced by both individual and environmental factors rather than as a fixed personality trait (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

4. Psychological Profile

4.1. Greater Trauma Awareness

One of the most frequently observed characteristics among cooperative victims is a relatively greater awareness of the nature and impact of their victimization. These individuals are often more capable of identifying the coercive tactics employed by traffickers, recognizing exploitation as abuse, distinguishing between genuine consent and coercion and understanding the criminal dimensions of their experiences (Reid, 2016).

Trauma awareness rarely emerges spontaneously. Rather, it often develops through psychoeducation, therapeutic interventions, victim advocacy services, and supportive social relationships that help survivors reframe their experiences within a victimization framework (Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006). As victims gain insight into the mechanisms of coercive control, they may become more willing to disclose information and collaborate with authorities.

Research on trauma recovery suggests that cognitive processing and meaning-making play an important role in victims' readiness to engage in legal proceedings. Individuals who have begun integrating traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative are generally better positioned to discuss those experiences in investigative contexts (Herman, 1992).

4.2. Higher Perceived Self-Efficacy

Cooperative victims frequently demonstrate higher levels of perceived self-efficacy, defined as the belief that one's actions can influence outcomes and contribute to desired goals (Bandura, 1997). Although these individuals may continue to experience significant trauma-related symptoms, they often retain a stronger sense of personal agency and control.

Characteristics commonly associated with higher self-efficacy include:

- Increased confidence in personal decision-making;
- A proactive approach to problem-solving;
- Greater willingness to seek assistance;
- Increased trust in available support systems;
- Stronger future-oriented thinking.

Research across trauma populations indicates that perceived self-efficacy is associated with greater help-seeking behavior, improved psychological adjustment and enhanced engagement with recovery processes (Benight & Bandura, 2004). In trafficking survivors, these characteristics may facilitate active participation in investigations despite ongoing emotional distress.

4.3. Lower Dependence on Traffickers

Compared with non-cooperative victims, cooperative individuals often demonstrate lower levels of emotional, financial, social, or practical dependence on traffickers. Traffickers commonly establish systems of control that create dependency through economic exploitation, emotional manipulation, threats, isolation and the deliberate erosion of victims' autonomy (Reid, 2016).

Victims who eventually cooperate with authorities are more likely to possess resources that reduce this dependency, including:

- Access to supportive family members or friends;
- Stronger social networks;
- Alternative sources of income;
- Legal assistance and victim services;
- Secure housing and protection measures;
- Successful physical and psychological separation from traffickers.

The reduction of dependency often increases victims' perception of safety and decreases fears regarding retaliation, thereby facilitating disclosure and cooperation (Baldwin et al., 2015).

4.4. Stronger Recovery Motivation

A further characteristic frequently observed among cooperative victims is a strong motivation for recovery and future reconstruction. Many survivors who engage with authorities express a desire not only to escape exploitation but also to reclaim personal autonomy and rebuild their lives.

Common motivations include:

- Achieving psychological recovery;
- Re-establishing social and family relationships;
- Securing education or employment opportunities;
- Protecting other potential victims;
- Holding traffickers accountable;
- Obtaining justice through the legal system.

This future-oriented perspective may provide victims with a sense of purpose that outweighs the perceived risks associated with participation in judicial proceedings. Studies on post-traumatic adaptation suggest that meaning-making and goal-directed behavior are important contributors to resilience and long-term recovery among survivors of severe victimization (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

4.5. Resilience Factors

The literature consistently identifies several protective factors associated with greater cooperation and engagement among trafficking survivors. These resilience-related variables appear to buffer the psychological effects of trauma and facilitate adaptive functioning following exploitation (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Protective factors commonly associated with cooperation include:

- Strong social support networks;
- Psychological resilience;
- Adaptive coping strategies;
- Educational attainment;
- Stable housing conditions;
- Economic opportunities;
- Access to mental health services;
- Positive relationships with victim advocates and professionals.

Social support appears particularly important. Survivors who perceive emotional and practical support from trusted individuals often report greater feelings of safety, reduced isolation and increased confidence in engaging with authorities (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Similarly, trauma-informed services can strengthen victims' coping capacities and reduce barriers to participation in legal processes.

5. The Non-Cooperative Victim: Psychological Characteristics

Definition

A non-cooperative victim is generally defined as a trafficked individual who demonstrates limited or absent engagement with law enforcement, judicial authorities or victim support services during criminal investigations and legal proceedings. Non-cooperation may manifest in various ways, including refusal to participate in interviews, provision of limited or inconsistent information, retraction of previous disclosures, avoidance of authorities, defense of traffickers or failure to appear in court (Farrell et al., 2019; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020).

Importantly, non-cooperation should not be interpreted as evidence that trafficking did not occur. Contemporary trauma-informed approaches emphasize that reluctance to engage with authorities often reflects the psychological consequences of prolonged coercion, exploitation, and traumatic victimization rather than deception, complicity or lack of credibility (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying non-cooperation is therefore essential for accurate forensic assessment and effective victim-centered interventions.

5.1. Severe Trauma Bonding

One of the most significant factors associated with victim non-cooperation is trauma bonding, a psychological attachment that develops between victims and perpetrators through repeated cycles of abuse, reward, dependency and emotional manipulation (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Reid, 2016).

Traffickers frequently employ alternating patterns of violence and apparent kindness, creating powerful emotional bonds that reinforce dependency and loyalty. Victims may become psychologically attached to individuals who simultaneously function as sources of both fear and perceived protection. This dynamic is particularly common in situations characterized by social isolation, economic dependence and prolonged exploitation.

As a consequence of trauma bonding, victims may:

- Protect traffickers from prosecution;
- Minimize or deny abuse;
- Rationalize exploitative behavior;
- Feel loyalty toward offenders;
- Experience guilt when cooperating with authorities;
- Resist separation from exploiters.

These reactions may appear irrational to investigators but are often consistent with well-documented psychological responses to coercive control and interpersonal victimization (Freyd, 1996; Herman, 1992).

5.2. Learned Helplessness

Another important contributor to non-cooperation is learned helplessness, a cognitive and behavioral state resulting from repeated exposure to uncontrollable adverse experiences (Seligman, 1975). Trafficking victims often endure prolonged periods during which attempts to resist, escape, or seek help are met with punishment, threats or failure.

Over time, victims may develop beliefs that:

- Escape is impossible;
- Authorities cannot provide protection;

- Retaliation is unavoidable;
- Their actions cannot change outcomes;
- Seeking assistance is futile.

This psychological state often persists even after victims have been removed from exploitative environments. Individuals may appear passive, indifferent or unwilling to engage in legal processes, not because they lack motivation, but because they have internalized expectations of powerlessness. Learned helplessness has been repeatedly associated with reduced help-seeking behavior and diminished participation in recovery efforts among survivors of chronic abuse (Walker, 1979).

5.3. Hypervigilance and Fear

Non-cooperative victims frequently exhibit intense fear responses that continue long after exploitation has ended. Trauma research indicates that survivors of prolonged victimization often remain in a state of hypervigilance, characterized by heightened sensitivity to potential threats and persistent expectations of danger (Cloitre et al., 2013).

Common fears reported by trafficking survivors include:

- Physical retaliation by traffickers;
- Harm directed toward family members;
- Deportation or immigration consequences;
- Social rejection and stigmatization;
- Economic insecurity and homelessness;
- Re-trafficking or renewed victimization;
- Distrust of authorities and institutions.

These fears may be realistic, particularly when traffickers have previously demonstrated their capacity for violence or retaliation. Even when objective threats have diminished, trauma-related fear responses may remain psychologically active, influencing victims' willingness to disclose information or participate in criminal proceedings (Baldwin et al., 2015).

5.4. Complex Dissociation

Many non-cooperative victims rely on dissociation as a coping mechanism for managing overwhelming traumatic experiences. Dissociation serves as a psychological defense that enables individuals to detach from distressing emotions, memories, or perceptions when direct coping becomes impossible (Spiegel et al., 2013).

Among trafficking survivors, dissociative symptoms may include:

- Memory fragmentation;
- Emotional numbing;
- Confusion regarding timelines;
- Inconsistent or incomplete narratives;
- Depersonalization;
- Derealization;
- Psychological detachment from traumatic experiences.

These symptoms have important implications for forensic investigations. Victims experiencing dissociation may struggle to provide coherent accounts of exploitation, recall specific details, or maintain consistency across multiple interviews. Investigators unfamiliar with trauma responses may incorrectly interpret such difficulties as evidence of fabrication or dishonesty,

when in fact they often reflect neuropsychological consequences of severe trauma (Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006).

5.5. Distorted Self-Concept

A further characteristic commonly observed among non-cooperative victims is a profoundly distorted self-concept shaped by chronic abuse, manipulation and degradation. Traffickers frequently employ psychological tactics designed to undermine victims' self-worth and foster dependency, including humiliation, blame, intimidation and emotional abuse (Reid, 2016).

As a result, victims may develop beliefs such as:

- They deserve mistreatment;
- The exploitation was their fault;
- They voluntarily chose their circumstances;
- They are morally compromised;
- Authorities will judge or punish them;
- They are unworthy of protection or assistance.

These self-perceptions are often reinforced by societal stigma, particularly among victims of sexual exploitation. Shame and self-blame may become so pervasive that victims avoid seeking help even when opportunities for assistance are available (Herman, 1992; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Such beliefs significantly undermine trust in support systems and reduce willingness to engage in investigations or legal proceedings.

6. Comparative Analysis

Trauma Severity

Contrary to common assumptions, non-cooperative victims frequently exhibit greater trauma severity than cooperative victims.

While cooperative victims may demonstrate substantial psychological distress, non-cooperative victims often present with:

- More pronounced PTSD symptoms;
- Greater dissociation;
- Stronger trauma bonds;
- Higher dependency on traffickers.

Thus, non-cooperation may reflect deeper psychological injury rather than resistance.

Table 1. Comparative Overview

Dimension	Cooperative Victims	Non-Cooperative Victims
Recognition of victimization	High	Low to moderate
Trauma bonding	Lower	Higher
Fear of trafficker	Moderate	High
Self-efficacy	Higher	Lower
Learned helplessness	Lower	Higher
Social support	Greater	Limited
Dissociation	Less pronounced	More pronounced
Trust in authorities	Higher	Lower

Dimension	Cooperative Victims	Non-Cooperative Victims
Recovery orientation	Stronger	Weaker
Judicial participation	Consistent	Limited or absent

The distinction between cooperative and non-cooperative trafficking victims should not be viewed as a rigid dichotomy. Rather, cooperation exists along a continuum and may fluctuate throughout the recovery and judicial process. Victims who initially refuse assistance may later become highly engaged with authorities, while initially cooperative victims may subsequently withdraw from proceedings due to psychological distress, safety concerns or external pressures (Farrell et al., 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018a). Understanding the factors that influence cooperation is therefore essential for effective victim-centered interventions and judicial responses.

6.1. Individual Factors

A variety of individual characteristics may influence a victim's willingness and capacity to cooperate with authorities. These factors do not determine cooperation in isolation but interact with relational and systemic variables.

Among the most important individual factors are:

- Personality characteristics;
- Psychological resilience;
- Coping strategies;
- Prior trauma history;
- Current mental health status.

Research suggests that individuals with greater resilience, stronger problem-solving abilities, and adaptive coping mechanisms may be better equipped to engage in recovery processes and legal proceedings despite significant trauma exposure (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Conversely, victims experiencing severe PTSD, depression, dissociation, or complex trauma symptoms may find participation in investigations psychologically overwhelming (Ottisova et al., 2016).

Previous experiences with abuse, victimization, or institutional betrayal may also influence perceptions of trust and safety. Victims with extensive trauma histories may be particularly reluctant to disclose exploitation or engage with authorities due to expectations of disbelief, rejection or further victimization (Freyd, 1996).

6.2. Relational Factors

The social environment surrounding trafficking survivors can substantially affect their willingness to cooperate. Interpersonal relationships often serve either as protective factors or as barriers to engagement with legal processes.

Important relational influences include:

- Family support;
- Peer support;
- Presence of dependent children;
- Ongoing contact with traffickers.

Supportive family members and trusted peers may provide emotional reassurance, practical assistance, and encouragement to participate in investigations (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). In

contrast, social isolation often increases vulnerability to traffickers' influence and may reinforce dependency.

The presence of dependent children represents a particularly significant factor. Some victims cooperate because they wish to secure safety and stability for their children, whereas others avoid participation due to fears that traffickers may retaliate against family members or that involvement with authorities could jeopardize parental responsibilities (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Continued communication with traffickers is strongly associated with reduced cooperation. Ongoing contact may reinforce trauma bonds, maintain fear of retaliation and perpetuate psychological control even after physical separation from the trafficking environment (Reid, 2016).

6.3. Systemic Factors

Victim cooperation is also profoundly influenced by the broader institutional context in which identification, protection, and prosecution occur. Even highly motivated victims may disengage if they encounter systemic barriers or perceive authorities as unsupportive.

Relevant systemic factors include:

- Quality and accessibility of victim services;
- Availability of interpreters and cultural mediators;
- Witness protection programs;
- Law enforcement attitudes and practices;
- Duration and complexity of judicial proceedings.

Research consistently demonstrates that trauma-informed, victim-centered services increase the likelihood of sustained cooperation (Office for Victims of Crime, 2020). Access to safe housing, legal assistance, psychological treatment and culturally competent support can reduce anxiety and increase victims' confidence in the justice system.

Conversely, lengthy investigations, repeated interviews, inadequate protection measures and insensitive interactions with professionals may discourage participation and contribute to secondary victimization (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018b). Victims are more likely to engage when they perceive authorities as trustworthy, respectful, and responsive to their needs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that cooperation should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual, relational, and systemic influences rather than as a stable personal characteristic.

7. Methodology

The empirical component of this research is currently in progress. Therefore, the present article describes the proposed methodology, assessment instruments, and statistical analysis plan that will be implemented during the data collection and analysis phases.

7.1. Study Design

The present study adopts a comparative cross-sectional mixed-method design to examine the psychological characteristics associated with procedural cooperation among adult victims of human trafficking. A mixed-method approach was selected because it allows the integration of standardized psychological assessment with qualitative forensic information derived from judicial case files and semi-structured interviews. Combining quantitative and qualitative data provides a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms influencing victims' willingness to cooperate during criminal investigations and judicial proceedings.

The quantitative component focuses on identifying statistically significant differences between cooperative and non-cooperative victims across multiple psychological variables. The qualitative component explores victims' subjective experiences of coercion, trauma, procedural participation, perceived safety, and interactions with judicial authorities. This design is particularly appropriate for trauma-informed forensic research because cooperation is recognized as a multidimensional construct influenced by psychological, relational, and contextual factors.

7.2. Participants and Sampling Procedure

The proposed sample will consist of approximately 80 adult victims of human trafficking recruited from specialized anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations, victim assistance centers, forensic psychological services, and judicial institutions involved in trafficking investigations in Romania.

Participants will be allocated into two comparison groups according to their procedural cooperation during criminal proceedings:

- Cooperative victims
- Non-cooperative victims

Classification will be performed using a standardized Procedural Cooperation Index developed for the present study.

Recruitment will be conducted through purposive sampling because human trafficking survivors represent a difficult-to-access population requiring specialized institutional support. Professionals working within participating organizations will identify eligible participants and provide information regarding the study.

Sample Size Estimation

An a priori statistical power analysis was conducted using G*Power version 3.1 to determine the minimum sample size required for the proposed analyses. Assuming a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.60$), a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, and a desired statistical power of 0.80, the analysis indicated that a minimum sample of approximately 72 participants would be required to detect statistically meaningful differences between cooperative and non-cooperative victims.

To account for potential participant attrition, incomplete assessments, and missing data, the target sample size was increased to approximately 80 participants. This sample size is considered adequate to ensure sufficient statistical power for the planned between-group comparisons, correlation analyses, binary logistic regression models, and mediation analyses examining the psychological predictors of procedural cooperation.

Procedural Cooperation Index

Because no standardized instrument specifically measuring procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking currently exists, the present study proposes a Procedural Cooperation Index (PCI) developed for research purposes based on the existing literature on victim engagement in criminal proceedings (Farrell et al., 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020).

The PCI operationalizes procedural cooperation as a multidimensional construct reflecting the extent to which victims actively engage with judicial authorities throughout criminal investigations and legal proceedings. The index comprises five observable indicators of procedural participation:

- attendance at the initial forensic interview;
- completion of the psychological assessment;
- provision of a formal witness statement;
- participation in judicial hearings;
- maintenance of procedural engagement throughout the investigation.

Each indicator is scored dichotomously (0 = No; 1 = Yes), yielding a total score ranging from 0 to 5.

Participants scoring 0–2 will be classified as non-cooperative, whereas those scoring 3–5 will be classified as cooperative. These cut-off values were selected to distinguish between limited procedural participation and sustained engagement with judicial authorities while maintaining consistency with the conceptual definition of victim cooperation adopted in the present study.

To establish content validity, the proposed index will be reviewed by an expert panel comprising forensic psychologists, prosecutors specializing in human trafficking cases, and victim-support professionals. Each expert will evaluate the relevance, clarity, and representativeness of the selected indicators.

Prior to the main study, the PCI will be pilot-tested on a small sample of trafficking survivors to assess the clarity and feasibility of the scoring procedure. Internal consistency will be evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and item-total correlations will be examined to determine the contribution of each indicator to the overall construct.

Although the PCI is newly developed, it is grounded in internationally recognized indicators of victim engagement described in trauma-informed forensic practice and human trafficking research, thereby supporting its conceptual relevance for the proposed study.

7.3. Inclusion Criteria

Participants must meet all of the following criteria:

- age of 18 years or older;
- official identification as a victim of human trafficking by competent Romanian authorities;
- completion of the initial crisis intervention phase;
- sufficient cognitive capacity to understand study procedures;
- ability to provide informed consent;
- adequate Romanian language proficiency to complete psychological assessments.

7.4. Exclusion Criteria

Individuals presenting any of the following conditions will be excluded:

- acute psychotic disorder;
- severe cognitive impairment;
- current psychiatric emergency requiring hospitalization;
- active suicidal crisis;
- severe intoxication or withdrawal symptoms during assessment;
- inability to complete the assessment protocol.

These exclusion criteria are intended to protect psychologically vulnerable participants while ensuring the validity of collected data.

Instruments

Trauma bonding will be assessed using the **Trauma Bonding Scale**, a self-report instrument designed to evaluate emotional attachment, dependency, loyalty, and cognitive distortions

toward perpetrators following prolonged interpersonal abuse. The instrument contains items rated on a Likert-type response scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger trauma bonding. Previous validation studies have reported satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$). The instrument was selected because trauma bonding represents one of the principal psychological mechanisms hypothesized to influence procedural cooperation among trafficking victims.

Perceived self-efficacy will be measured using the **General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES)** developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995). The GSES consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all true") to 4 ("Exactly true"). Total scores range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater perceived self-efficacy. Numerous international studies have demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging between .82 and .90. The instrument was selected because perceived self-efficacy has consistently been associated with adaptive coping, help-seeking behaviour, and active engagement in recovery and judicial proceedings.

Perceived social support will be assessed using the **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)** developed by Zimet et al. (1988). The MSPSS contains 12 items assessing support received from family, friends, and significant others. Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support. Previous validation studies have reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .92. The MSPSS was selected because social support is expected to function as a protective factor facilitating procedural cooperation.

Symptoms of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) will be assessed using the **International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ)** developed by Cloitre et al. (2018). The ITQ is a standardized self-report instrument specifically designed to assess the diagnostic criteria for PTSD and Complex PTSD according to the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11). The questionnaire consists of 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("Not at all") to 4 ("Extremely"), with higher scores indicating greater symptom severity. Previous validation studies have demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally ranging from .83 to .94. The ITQ was selected because it is currently one of the most widely used and psychometrically validated instruments for assessing Complex PTSD in trauma-exposed populations and is particularly suitable for forensic psychological research involving victims of prolonged interpersonal trauma.

Dissociative symptoms will be assessed using the **Dissociative Experiences Scale-II (DES-II)** developed by **Bernstein and Putnam (1986)**. The DES-II is a widely used self-report measure consisting of 28 items that evaluate the frequency of dissociative experiences, including depersonalization, derealization, memory disturbances, and absorption. Respondents indicate the percentage of time they experience each symptom on an 11-point scale ranging from 0% to 100%, and the overall score is calculated as the mean of all item responses. Higher scores indicate greater levels of dissociation. The DES-II has demonstrated excellent internal consistency across numerous studies, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding .90. The instrument was selected because dissociation is hypothesized to play a central role in testimonial inconsistency and procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking.

A semi-structured forensic interview developed specifically for the present study will complement the standardized psychometric assessment. The interview will explore participants' trafficking experiences, coercive control, procedural cooperation, perceived threats, interactions with judicial authorities, and motivations influencing participation in criminal proceedings. Interviews will follow trauma-informed interviewing principles to

minimize retraumatization while allowing participants to provide detailed contextual information that cannot be captured through standardized questionnaires alone.

7.5. Data Collection Procedure

Following institutional approval, eligible participants will receive written and verbal information describing the study.

After providing informed consent, participants will complete standardized psychological questionnaires administered individually by trained forensic psychologists.

Each assessment session is expected to last between 90 and 120 minutes, including scheduled breaks whenever necessary to minimize emotional distress.

Judicial records will be reviewed only after obtaining appropriate institutional authorization and participant consent.

7.6. Ethical Considerations

The study will be conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and national ethical standards governing research involving human participants. Participation will be entirely voluntary. Written informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Confidentiality will be maintained through anonymization of all collected data, secure electronic storage, and restricted database access.

Given the vulnerability of trafficking survivors, several trauma-informed safeguards will be implemented. Interviews will be conducted exclusively by psychologists trained in trauma-informed interviewing techniques. Participants will be informed that they may interrupt or terminate the interview at any time without negative consequences. If significant emotional distress emerges during assessment, the interview will be suspended immediately and psychological support will be offered. No identifying information will appear in publications resulting from the study.

7.7. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses will be performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

Descriptive statistics will first be computed to summarize participants' demographic and psychological characteristics. Continuous variables will be reported as means and standard deviations (SD), whereas categorical variables will be presented as frequencies and percentages.

The normality of data distribution will be assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, together with visual inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots. Homogeneity of variances will be evaluated using Levene's test.

Comparisons between cooperative and non-cooperative victims will be conducted using independent-samples t-tests for normally distributed continuous variables. When assumptions of normality are violated, the Mann–Whitney U test will be applied. Associations between categorical variables will be examined using the chi-square (χ^2) test of independence or Fisher's exact test when expected cell frequencies are small.

Relationships among continuous psychological variables, including Complex PTSD symptoms, trauma bonding, dissociation, perceived self-efficacy, and perceived social support, will be examined using Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). When variables are not normally distributed, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) will be used.

To identify the independent psychological predictors of procedural cooperation, a binary logistic regression analysis will be performed. Procedural cooperation (cooperative vs. non-cooperative) will serve as the dependent variable, while Complex PTSD symptoms, trauma bonding, dissociation, perceived self-efficacy, social support, and selected demographic variables will be entered as independent predictors. Odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) will be reported.

To further explore the psychological mechanisms underlying procedural cooperation, mediation analyses will be conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4). Specifically, dissociation and trauma bonding will be examined as potential mediators of the relationship between Complex PTSD symptoms and procedural cooperation. Indirect effects will be estimated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples, and mediation will be considered statistically significant when the 95% bootstrap confidence interval does not include zero.

Effect sizes will be reported for all primary analyses to facilitate interpretation of practical significance. Cohen's d will be calculated for between-group comparisons, Cramér's V for chi-square analyses, and Nagelkerke's R^2 for logistic regression models.

All statistical tests will be two-tailed, with statistical significance established at $p < .05$.

7.8. Missing Data and Attrition

Patterns of missing data will be examined before statistical analyses are performed. When missing data account for less than 5% of the dataset and are determined to be missing completely at random, the expectation-maximization algorithm will be used to estimate missing values. If the proportion of missing data exceeds 5%, multiple imputation procedures will be applied to reduce potential bias and preserve statistical power.

Participant attrition will be monitored throughout the study. The number of participants who withdraw, together with the reasons for withdrawal whenever these are available, will be documented. To assess the potential impact of attrition on study findings, baseline demographic and psychological characteristics of participants who complete the study will be compared with those who withdraw before completion. Any significant differences will be reported and considered when interpreting the results.

Hypotheses

H1: Victims classified as non-cooperative will report significantly higher levels of C-PTSD symptoms than cooperative victims.

H2: Trauma bonding will be negatively associated with procedural cooperation.

H3: Dissociation will significantly predict testimonial inconsistency.

H4: Higher perceived self-efficacy will positively predict victim cooperation.

H5: Greater social support will be associated with increased judicial participation.

8. Results and Discussion

Expected Results

The proposed study is expected to identify several significant psychological predictors of procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking. Based on existing trauma literature and forensic psychological theory, the anticipated findings are discussed below.

To facilitate understanding of the proposed research framework, Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model underlying the present study. The model summarizes the hypothesized

relationships between trauma severity, dissociation, trauma bonding, self-efficacy, social support, resilience, and procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking.

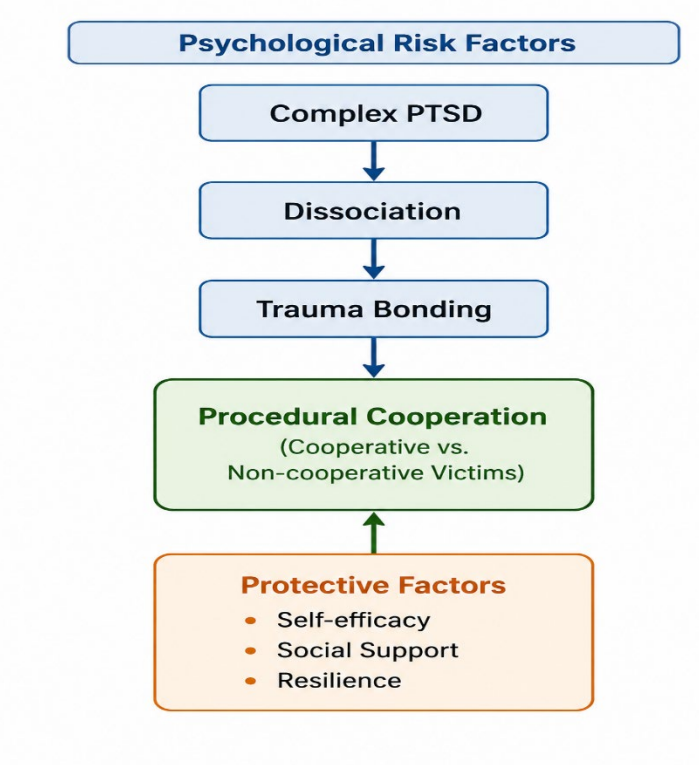


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model illustrating the psychological predictors of procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking.

H1: Victims classified as non-cooperative will report significantly higher levels of C-PTSD symptoms than cooperative victims.

To test H1, an independent-samples t-test will be conducted to compare C-PTSD symptom severity scores between cooperative and non-cooperative victims. Victim cooperation status will serve as the grouping variable, while total C-PTSD score will serve as the dependent variable. If the assumption of normality is violated, a Mann–Whitney U test will be used as a non-parametric alternative.

H2: Trauma bonding will be negatively associated with procedural cooperation

It is expected that trauma bonding will demonstrate a significant negative correlation with procedural cooperation. Victims exhibiting stronger emotional attachment to traffickers are likely to be less willing to disclose abuse, participate in interviews, or maintain consistent engagement throughout judicial proceedings. Trauma bonding is anticipated to function as one of the strongest psychological barriers to cooperation because emotional dependency often coexists with fear, guilt, and cognitive distortions regarding the perpetrator.

From a forensic perspective, this finding would support the interpretation that apparent resistance to judicial authorities should not automatically be interpreted as unwillingness to seek justice, but rather as a predictable consequence of prolonged coercive control. Consequently, forensic experts should routinely assess trauma bonding when evaluating victims' procedural behavior.

H3: Dissociation will significantly predict testimonial inconsistency

The study is expected to demonstrate that higher levels of dissociative symptoms significantly predict testimonial inconsistency. Victims presenting greater dissociation are likely to report fragmented memories, temporal confusion, incomplete narratives, and variable recall across repeated interviews.

These anticipated findings would be consistent with neuropsychological models of traumatic memory, suggesting that inconsistencies in testimony often reflect trauma-related cognitive processing rather than intentional deception. Such evidence would have important implications for courtroom practice, encouraging judges and prosecutors to interpret fragmented testimony within a trauma-informed psychological framework instead of viewing inconsistency as diminished credibility.

H4: Higher perceived self-efficacy will positively predict victim cooperation

It is anticipated that perceived self-efficacy will emerge as a positive predictor of procedural cooperation. Victims who believe they possess greater personal control over their circumstances are expected to demonstrate increased willingness to engage with investigators, comply with judicial procedures, and maintain participation throughout criminal proceedings.

Higher self-efficacy may also facilitate help-seeking behavior, reduce avoidance responses, and strengthen confidence in institutional support systems. These findings would reinforce the importance of psychological interventions aimed at restoring victims' sense of agency before and during legal proceedings.

H5: Greater social support will be associated with increased judicial participation

The proposed study is expected to demonstrate that perceived social support is positively associated with judicial participation. Victims who benefit from supportive family members, victim advocates, mental health professionals, or specialized NGOs are expected to report greater procedural engagement and increased willingness to cooperate with authorities.

Social support is likely to reduce fear of retaliation, improve psychological stability, and enhance trust in legal institutions. Consequently, the availability of trauma-informed multidisciplinary services may represent one of the strongest protective factors facilitating successful participation in criminal justice processes.

Overall, the anticipated findings are expected to demonstrate that procedural cooperation is not determined by victims' willingness alone but emerges from the interaction between trauma severity, emotional dependency, psychological resilience, and environmental support. These results would provide empirical support for trauma-informed forensic assessment models and contribute to more accurate interpretations of victim behavior during investigations and courtroom testimony.

The findings presented in this analysis suggest that the distinction between cooperative and non-cooperative trafficking victims should not be conceptualized as a dichotomy between “good” and “difficult” witnesses. Such a perspective risks oversimplifying the complex psychological consequences of human trafficking and may contribute to inaccurate assessments of victim credibility and needs. Rather, cooperation and non-cooperation appear to represent different manifestations of adaptation to prolonged coercion, trauma and exploitation (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Reid, 2016).

The comparative analysis indicates that cooperative victims often possess a greater number of protective and resilience-related factors. These individuals are more likely to benefit from supportive social networks, access to psychological services, stable living conditions and

opportunities for recovery. They frequently demonstrate greater awareness of their victimization, stronger perceptions of self-efficacy, and a clearer capacity to envision a future beyond exploitation. Such characteristics may facilitate engagement with law enforcement and judicial authorities, even in the presence of significant trauma-related symptoms (Bandura, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

In contrast, non-cooperative victims often remain psychologically entangled with traffickers through mechanisms such as trauma bonding, learned helplessness, dependency, chronic fear and coercive control. Their reluctance to disclose information or participate in legal proceedings should therefore be understood within the context of survival strategies developed during exploitation rather than as evidence of deception, consent, or unwillingness to seek justice (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Herman, 1992). Behaviors that may appear irrational from a legal perspective—including defending traffickers, minimizing abuse, retracting disclosures or avoiding authorities—can often be explained by well-established trauma-related processes.

An important finding emerging from both clinical and forensic literature is that cooperation is not a stable or permanent characteristic. Victims may move between cooperative and non-cooperative positions over time depending on changes in psychological functioning, perceived safety, social support and environmental circumstances (Farrell et al., 2019). A victim who initially refuses assistance may later become a highly effective witness after receiving psychological treatment, secure housing, legal advocacy, and protection from traffickers. Conversely, individuals who initially cooperate may subsequently withdraw from proceedings if they experience retraumatization, intimidation, threats against family members, or loss of confidence in the justice system.

These observations support contemporary trauma-informed models that conceptualize victim engagement as a dynamic process rather than a fixed behavioral outcome (Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006). Such models emphasize that readiness to cooperate is influenced by ongoing interactions among psychological, relational, and systemic factors. Consequently, legal professionals should avoid making global judgments about victim credibility based solely on observable levels of cooperation.

The present analysis also highlights the importance of recognizing the effects of trauma on memory and disclosure. Research has demonstrated that severe and chronic trauma may contribute to fragmented recall, delayed reporting, dissociation, emotional numbing, and inconsistencies in narrative accounts (Spiegel et al., 2013; Cloitre et al., 2013). Although these features may be perceived as indicators of unreliability within traditional legal frameworks, they are often consistent with established psychological responses to traumatic victimization. Failure to consider these mechanisms may increase the risk of misinterpreting trauma-related symptoms as intentional deception.

From a forensic perspective, the findings reinforce the necessity of comprehensive psychological assessments that incorporate trauma, coercive control, attachment dynamics, and sociocultural influences. Evaluations focused exclusively on overt behavioral indicators of cooperation may overlook the underlying psychological processes that shape victim responses. A trauma-informed assessment framework provides a more accurate basis for understanding victim behavior and for informing judicial decision-making.

The findings further suggest that institutional responses play a critical role in shaping victim cooperation. Access to specialized services, culturally competent interventions, witness protection measures, and supportive interactions with professionals can significantly enhance engagement with legal proceedings. Conversely, adversarial practices, repeated interviewing, delays in prosecution and inadequate protection may reinforce fear and disengagement (Office

for Victims of Crime, 2020). Thus, cooperation should be viewed not only as a function of individual psychology but also as an outcome influenced by the responsiveness and effectiveness of support systems.

Ultimately, understanding the psychological dynamics underlying cooperation and non-cooperation requires a shift from behavior-based judgments toward trauma-informed psychological interpretation. Such a shift enables investigators, forensic psychologists, prosecutors, and judges to better recognize the complex realities of trafficking victimization, reduce the risk of secondary victimization, and promote more equitable and effective judicial outcomes.

Implications for Forensic Psychology

Forensic psychologists play a critical role in the assessment and interpretation of trafficking victims' psychological functioning. Their evaluations frequently inform judicial decisions regarding victim credibility, vulnerability, competency, risk and the psychological impact of exploitation.

One of the most important tasks for forensic evaluators is distinguishing trauma-related inconsistencies from deliberate deception. Survivors of trafficking may present fragmented narratives, delayed disclosures, memory gaps, or contradictory statements due to dissociation, emotional distress and the neurobiological effects of trauma (Spiegel et al., 2013). Such presentations should not automatically be interpreted as indicators of unreliability.

Assessment should also examine the extent to which coercive control has influenced victims' beliefs, behaviors and decision-making processes. Traffickers frequently employ manipulation, intimidation, dependency creation, and psychological domination that can profoundly affect victims' perceptions of reality and autonomy (Stark, 2007).

Importantly, forensic psychologists must avoid equating non-cooperation with lack of victimization. A trauma-informed forensic framework recognizes that behaviors commonly perceived as paradoxical—including defending traffickers, minimizing abuse, retracting disclosures, or refusing assistance—may represent predictable consequences of prolonged coercive victimization rather than evidence of consent or fabrication (Herman, 1992; Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006).

By integrating contemporary trauma research into forensic evaluations, psychologists can provide courts with more accurate interpretations of victim behavior and contribute to fairer judicial outcomes.

Implications for Judicial Proceedings

Human trafficking prosecutions frequently depend on victim testimony. However, the psychological consequences of trafficking create unique challenges for judicial systems that traditionally rely on expectations of consistent disclosure, sustained cooperation, and linear victim behavior.

Trauma research demonstrates that victim cooperation often fluctuates over time and should not be viewed as a static indicator of credibility or victim status (Farrell et al., 2019). Emotional distress, safety concerns, trauma triggers and ongoing psychological recovery may influence participation at different stages of proceedings.

To address these challenges, judicial systems increasingly adopt trauma-informed practices designed to reduce secondary victimization while improving evidentiary quality.

These measures can reduce anxiety, enhance victims' capacity to provide accurate information, and improve the overall quality of testimony (Office for Victims of Crime, 2020). Furthermore,

trauma-informed procedures promote procedural fairness by ensuring that victim behavior is interpreted within the context of exploitation rather than through stereotypes regarding how a victim is expected to act.

Ultimately, judicial responses that acknowledge the psychological realities of trafficking are more likely to secure both victim protection and successful prosecution outcomes. By recognizing the complex factors influencing cooperation, courts can better balance evidentiary needs with the rights, safety, and psychological well-being of trafficking survivors.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Although the proposed study is designed to provide a comprehensive trauma-informed framework for understanding procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged**.** Because data collection is currently ongoing, the present manuscript should be considered a research protocol. The final empirical findings will be reported following completion of participant recruitment, data analysis, and validation of the proposed conceptual model.

First, the proposed sample size is relatively modest and will be recruited exclusively from Romania. Although purposive sampling is appropriate for research involving hard-to-reach populations such as trafficking survivors, the findings may not be fully generalizable to victims from different cultural, legal, or socioeconomic contexts. Future studies should include larger and more diverse international samples to enhance the external validity of the proposed model.

Second, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between psychological variables and procedural cooperation. Because cooperation is likely to change throughout the recovery process and judicial proceedings, longitudinal research is needed to examine how trauma-related symptoms, self-efficacy, social support, and trauma bonding evolve over time and influence victims' engagement with the justice system.

A further limitation concerns the reliance on self-report psychometric instruments. Although standardized questionnaires represent reliable and widely accepted assessment tools, responses may be influenced by recall bias, emotional distress, social desirability, or trauma-related memory disturbances. Combining self-report measures with clinical interviews, behavioral observations, and official judicial records may strengthen future investigations.

In addition, the Procedural Cooperation Index proposed in this study is a newly developed research instrument. Although its content validity and internal consistency will be evaluated, further psychometric validation, including construct validity, criterion validity, and test–retest reliability, will be necessary before broader application in forensic research and practice.

Future research should also examine additional variables that may influence procedural cooperation, including institutional trust, cultural beliefs, perceived procedural justice, coping strategies, and the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions. Comparative studies across different forms of human trafficking and legal systems would further contribute to understanding the complex mechanisms underlying victim cooperation and improve evidence-based forensic and judicial practices.

10.Conclusion

The proposed study highlights that procedural cooperation among victims of human trafficking should be understood as the result of multiple interacting psychological, relational, and contextual factors rather than as a simple expression of willingness to assist judicial authorities.

Trauma-related variables—including Complex PTSD, dissociation, trauma bonding, and learned helplessness—are expected to represent significant barriers to cooperation, whereas self-efficacy, resilience, and social support are anticipated to facilitate victims' engagement with criminal investigations and judicial proceedings.

The findings are expected to reinforce a trauma-informed perspective on victim behavior, demonstrating that reluctance to cooperate or inconsistencies in testimony should not automatically be interpreted as indicators of deception or reduced credibility. Instead, such behaviors are more appropriately understood as adaptive psychological responses to prolonged coercion, exploitation, and interpersonal trauma.

The proposed conceptual framework also emphasizes that procedural cooperation is dynamic and may change over time as victims' psychological recovery, perceived safety, and access to supportive services improve. Recognizing this dynamic process may assist forensic psychologists, investigators, prosecutors, and judges in adopting more accurate and victim-centered approaches to assessment, interviewing, and credibility evaluation.

Overall, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of trauma-informed forensic research by identifying measurable psychological predictors of procedural cooperation and by providing a structured framework for understanding victim engagement in trafficking prosecutions. Future empirical studies should validate the proposed model in larger and more diverse samples and examine its applicability across different forms of human trafficking and legal contexts.

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