

Psychological Profiling of Human Traffickers: Personality Traits and Cognitive Distortions

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a psychological profile of human traffickers by identifying predominant personality traits, cognitive distortions, and moral disengagement mechanisms that sustain exploitative behavior. The main objective is to understand how specific psychological configurations contribute to manipulation, coercion, and the systematic dehumanization of victims. The research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining a quantitative component—based on the administration of standardized psychological assessment tools (e.g., Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and Moral Disengagement Scale)—with a qualitative analysis of case studies and judicial reports involving convicted traffickers. Participants included 45 offenders (male and female) serving sentences for human trafficking in Romanian and European penitentiaries. Statistical analyses (Pearson correlations and regression models) explored associations between personality dimensions and justifying cognitive schemas. Qualitative content analysis identified recurring patterns of rationalization, denial, and victim-blaming.

The results indicate a high prevalence of psychopathic and Machiavellian traits, accompanied by significant cognitive distortions that minimize personal responsibility and reframe exploitation as justified or inevitable. Emotional detachment and instrumental empathy emerged as central elements facilitating long-term engagement in trafficking activities. The study concludes that these psychological mechanisms form a self-reinforcing system that perpetuates moral disengagement and resistance to rehabilitation. Understanding these dynamics can enhance forensic assessment, investigative profiling, and the design of targeted intervention programs for offender reintegration and prevention of recidivism.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Psychological Profiling, Personality Traits, Cognitive Distortions, Moral Disengagement, Psychopathy, Forensic Assessment, Mixed-Method Research.