In this chapter I define the human trafficking of women and girls in the United States within a historical, psychological, and social context. To start, I present three cases to discuss two types of human trafficking scenarios, the iconic (Srikantiah, 2007) and the overlooked. Next, I connect human trafficking to slavery. I discuss vulnerabilities to human trafficking with attention to contextual, structural, and individual factors. In the recruitment methods section, I provide an overview of psychological coercion that complements existing legal constructs of human trafficking (Trafficking Victims Protection Act [TVPA], 2000). Thereafter, I propose the overlooked victim construct to represent cases in which the victim is made invisible by a combination of psychological and social factors. In closing, I offer an evolving psychosocial–historical definition of human trafficking.

I do not provide a separate section with numbers of trafficked persons for two reasons. First, systems to accurately track human trafficking prevalence remain underdeveloped in the United States and globally. Human trafficking prevalence numbers currently published in various reports were generated using questionable methods (Jahic & Finckenuer, 2005; United Nations, 2014; Weitzer, 2015). My position related to the substantial attention and resources dedicated to count human trafficking is pertinent here. As a psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist who practices within a human rights frame to work with survivors of trauma, I use the position of psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003) to justify the need to respond to human trafficking. Psychopolitical validity runs opposite to mainstream psychology positions that, sometimes, support oppressive institutional views, even if inadvertently. For example, an absence of numbers on trafficking prevalence should not move psychology away from the issue of human trafficking. Despite the absence of numbers, human trafficking is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed, and psychology can respond to human trafficking by supporting research that helps understand the power dynamics and structural factors that fuel it. In my antitrafficking work, I consider issues of well-being, oppression, and liberation in relation to the individual, relational, and collective domains (Prilleltensky, 2008). Therefore, adopting a psychopolitical validity stance requires me to consider how a given research question, or a theory applied in practice, could benefit or affect the afflicted, in this case the formerly or currently trafficked persons I interact with as a clinician, researcher, and consultant. Prilleltensky (2008) explained that when psychopolitical validity is institutionalized instead of isolating important social issues, it merges discussions of wellness and justice and encourages a multidisciplinary approach, which is needed to respond to human trafficking (Contreras, Kallivayalil, & Herman, 2017).

HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES

Following are three cases that represent two types of trafficking scenarios, iconic and overlooked, which are described later in this chapter (see Toward an...
Evolving Definition of Human Trafficking section). For now, I present these cases as examples to highlight key concepts throughout.

Iconic Sex Trafficking Case
One of the characteristics of iconic cases of human trafficking (Srikantiah, 2007) is the trafficker’s use of force on the victim to facilitate exploitation. A case that stands out for me is of a young woman I evaluated, whom I refer to as Magda. Gang members abducted Magda in her Latin America hometown and brought her to the United States, where she was locked and sometimes chained inside of a house. For more than a year, Magda’s trafficker offered her for sex to gang members who stopped at the house during drug smuggling runs between Mexico and the United States. Law enforcement officers rescued Magda during the course of a drug raid.

Overlooked Sex Trafficking Case
The overlooked victim in sex trafficking is a construct needed to represent human trafficking cases where a sharp divide exists between the expected (i.e., iconic) traits of a human trafficking case and the facts of the case.

Consider the case of a girl I refer to as Amalia, who was 27 years old and originally from the Midwestern United States. To escape an abusive home environment, she moved to the East Coast with an older female friend when she was 18 years old. Amalia noted that when she moved to the East Coast, she was full of hope. Her plan was to find a job, save money, and eventually go to college. Amalia’s friend had arranged for them to stay with an acquaintance, Meredith. Amalia noted that, shortly after arriving, she began to feel depressed and anxious. She secured a job in a supermarket, which she lost a week later because she was unable to wake up early enough to make it on time for work.

Soon after losing her job, Meredith asked Amalia to start paying rent. Amalia said she had run out of money and that she feared being homeless; worse in her mind was the shame of having to go back to the Midwest. Hoping for Meredith’s sympathy, Amalia shared her concerns. Meredith gave Amalia the phone number of a man, Mario, and told her he had helped Meredith out with “work” for “quick money” when she was struggling financially.

Amalia said that she understood Meredith had given her contact information of a pimp. She promised herself that she would only prostitute for as long as it took her to save money to cover 6 months of living expenses. Amalia started to prostitute for Mario the following day. She noted, “Mario set up my appointments and I worked out of local hotels. He liked that I looked young. I thought he paid me fairly and I made what felt like a lot of money.”

A month later, Henry, a sex buyer, called Amalia. Henry invited her to dinner and still feeling depressed and without friends, Amalia eagerly accepted his attention. Henry was loving and their relationship quickly grew intense. Amalia noted that she began to feel better about herself, “I had been feeling down and anxious and suddenly I had hope again with this relationship.” She noted that, initially, Henry told her that he owned a business. Henry invited Amalia to move in with him so that she could stop prostituting, and Amalia accepted. She was shocked when two weeks later Henry asked her to prostitute.

Overlooked Labor Trafficking Case
An Indian woman I interviewed, whom I refer to as Ramya, constitutes an example of the overlooked victim in cases of human trafficking for manual labor. Ramya explained that a family friend in India recommended her to work with a couple in the United States. Ramya traveled to the United States with another Indian woman the couple also employed. Ramya explained that, over time, she developed a very positive relationship with the couple. They were young professionals and she generally experienced them as caring. However, the couple forced Ramya to sleep in an unheated basement through the cold Northeast winters, and they paid her approximately a dollar an hour salary for 50-hr work weeks. She was expected to clean their

1 Although I use the terms victim and survivor interchangeably, I recognize the survivor status of all women and persons with histories of trafficking, including those who are currently trapped in trafficking, who have escaped, left, or been rescued from trafficking, who returned to trafficking or were re-trafficked, and those who permanently exited trafficking.

2 Names, demographics, and other identifying information of clinical cases have been altered to ensure privacy.
three bedroom home, cook all meals, keep the gar- den, babysit their toddler, and tend to two dogs. The couple also prohibited Ramya from talking to people outside of the home. She was allowed to call India once a month but the conversation was always mon- itored. Despite the degree of exploitation Ramya suf- fered, she explained that in India, employers would not have been as “nice” and that her salary, though much less than the couple had promised, was still more than she ever earned in India.

A review of Patterson’s (2012) first facet (social) is necessary to establish important connections between human trafficking and slavery. The social facet requires the master’s use of violence or threat of violence to control the slave, which she or he carries out with different forms of social–cultural alienation, such as natal alienation. In the history of slavery in the United States, enslaved people were taken from their homes in Africa, transported to the United States, and forced to incorporate in the master’s land. The descendants of those slaves were not recognized as belonging to their parent’s natal home or to the master’s land, and hence became stateless and kinless.

Here, Patterson made the connection to human trafficking, noting that, today, traditional alienation bears its closest ties with people illegally transported by traffickers from their home country to a destination country to be exploited. Such is the case of international victims of human trafficking in the United States, who when victimized fear turning to law enforcement for protection because of their undocumented status (Angel, 2007; Aronowitz, 2001; Haynes, 2004; Hepburn & Simon, 2010; Rieger, 2007). Lacking documents and state protection, these persons are forced into a state of social isolation where they continue to be exploited.

**Gender and Slavery**

With respect to gender in relation to historical slavery and human trafficking, Patterson (2012) also made noteworthy connections. First, the second-class status of nonslave women created the model for the master–slave relationship. Second, in most slave-condoning societies, women were and continued to be the gender most vulnerable to enslavement—this is especially true today for sex trafficking (United Nations, 2014).

The gendered and racialized roots of sex trafficking in relation to slavery in the United States are noted by others (Butler, 2015). Butler (2015) explained that to justify the sexual exploitation of Black slaves, White society constructed an over-sexed identity of Black women as “exhibiting an insatiable appetite for free and loose sex, thereby excusing White men’s unlimited sexual access to and abuse of Black women, which was an inherent...
part of slavery” (p. 3). Postslavery Jim Crow laws, Butler noted, continued to hold the sexually deviant construct of Black women. Those who encountered employment discrimination not experienced by their White counterparts were pushed into prostitution as a means of economic survival.

Legalized Contemporary Forms of Exploitation
Although slavery is illegal in almost all societies today, not all forms of exploitation are illegal (Patterson, 2012). For example, the legal foreign-bride industry in the United States is a form of modern enslavement (Kim, 2011; U.S. Congress, 2004). Examples abound of undocumented workers subjected to trafficking-like labor conditions in the United States and other countries (Bauer, 2007; Burnham & Theodore, 2012; Domestic Workers United and Data Center, 2006; Kim, 2015; National Employment Law Project, 2010; Tamayo, 2011). And numerous cases of exploitation in domestic work (e.g., Ramya’s case) that meet criteria for human trafficking have been uncovered in the homes of diplomatic families living in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

As a final and important point that highlights the United States’s continuum in its history of exploitation, populations of the Americas who suffered historical slavery and genocide remain especially vulnerable to trafficking today. For example, overrepresentation of sex trafficking of indigenous populations (Bourgeois, 2015; Kingsley & Mark, 2000; Pierce, 2009, 2012; Ribando Seelke, 2015; Ugarte, Zarate, & Farley, 2003) and Black women and girls (Butler, 2015; Phillips, 2015) continues to be a trend.

MODERN HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE UNITED STATES
In the United States, human trafficking began to receive government attention with the passing of the TVPA (2000). Although many questions remain regarding the unique traits of human trafficking, every year, the antitrafficking field grows in its experience and knowledge (U.S. Department of State, 2016). In the following sections, I review the general characteristics of human trafficking in the United States, including types of human trafficking, vulnerabilities to human trafficking, and recruitment methods.

Types of Human Trafficking
Human trafficking can, but does not always, include the movement or transportation of the victim (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Domestic trafficking occurs when the victim is recruited and exploited using force, fraud, or coercion in the United States. Victims of domestic trafficking can include citizens and documented or undocumented foreigners living in the United States. International trafficking occurs when a trafficker(s) recruits a victim in a foreign country using force, fraud, or coercion, and then facilitates the victim’s transport to the United States with the intention to exploit the victim (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Most prevalent types of human trafficking in the United States include sexual exploitation and trafficking for manual labor (United Nations, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Sex trafficking. Sexual exploitation occurs when an individual is forced to participate in commercial sex through the use of force, fraud, or coercion and the trafficker retains most or all profits from the victim’s work. Trafficking legislation in the United States (TVPA, 2000) considers minors under the age of 18 involved in commercial sex as human trafficking victims irrespective of proof of force, fraud, or coercion (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Sex trafficking exists in multiple business types, including fake massage parlors, escort services, and residential brothels and occurs in truck stops, on streets and public roads, in strip clubs, in bars, in hostess clubs, in hotels, in motels, and any other locality where sexual exploitation is possible.

Trafficking for manual labor. Trafficking for manual labor occurs when an individual is forced to participate in labor through the use of force, fraud, or coercion and the trafficker retains most or all profits from the victim’s work (TVPA, 2000). In trafficking for manual labor, victims are forced to perform labor or services in multiple industries, including factories, most notably in the garment industry and food processing; hospitality, especially as room attendants; restaurant and food service; and in domestic work (U.S. Department of State, 2016).
Vulnerabilities Contributing to Human Trafficking

Binaries about human trafficking render invisible the intersectionality that characterizes all cases (see Volume 1, Chapters 27–30, this handbook). Vulnerabilities to human trafficking vary and the type and degree of vulnerability can change over the life course (Reid, 2012). In the next section, I outline the contextual, structural, and individual vulnerabilities that make human trafficking possible. Advanced recognition is warranted that a complex interplay occurs between these vulnerabilities to lead to human trafficking, a process that cannot be fully captured here partly because of a lack of research in this area but also because subjectivities, the most inner reflections that people generate from their experiences, are naturally complex and challenging to document (Gough & Madill, 2012).

Vulnerabilities related to the context, structural factors, and weak legal protections. Structural and contextual factors identified as contributing to human trafficking shared by domestic and international victims include living in environments that present with organized crime, economies reliant on the sex industry, weak social safety nets, machismo and pimping culture, social devaluation of women and children (Reid, 2012), and a culture of tolerance toward intimate partner violence (Ventura, 2016). Additional contextual risk factors for international victims include armed conflict, political instability, and natural disasters in the country of recruitment; police corruption; forced migration; and high presence of fraudulent travel and employment agencies (Reid, 2012). For domestic victims, additional contextual vulnerabilities include high presence of fraudulent employment agencies, communities with poor police training to interact with youth at risk for trafficking, and high gang activity.

Where legal and policy protections exist to address human trafficking, sometimes these fail to fully protect the victims, survivors, and vulnerable populations, which can further create structural vulnerabilities. Pourmokhtari (2015) outlined that most governments address human trafficking through a criminal or economic lens. The criminal approach emphasizes the role of the criminal justice system to classify victims, prosecute traffickers, and to criminalize human trafficking and activities related to it (e.g., prostitution, undocumented immigration).

Actions that derive from the criminal approach (e.g., strengthening border security to prevent undocumented immigration) fail to protect the well-being of migrants and increase their vulnerability to human trafficking. Even persons trafficked within their birth country, with the right to state protection, as Patterson (2012) noted, may fear local authorities because they belong to a persecuted group (e.g., criminalized prostitutes; Cross, 2013; Halter, 2010; Herman, 2005; Lange, 2011; Williamson, Baker, Jenkins, & Cluse-Tolar, 2007).

The economic model treats human trafficking as a business that is incentivized by profits. The assumption is that, to counter human trafficking, economic opportunities need to be created for potential victims to minimize the drive they experience to accept a trafficker’s ruse (Pourmokhtari, 2015). Though an idea with merit, it fails to recognize noneconomic victim vulnerabilities, such as previous traumas (e.g., rape, sexual abuse) and people trapped in war or high-conflict zones.

Pourmokhtari (2015) argued that the criminal and economic approach veils human trafficking’s complexity and overlooks the victim’s inherent human rights. Therefore, the desirable alternative is policies that focus on human rights and the confluence of factors that contribute to human trafficking.

Vulnerability related to trafficking profits and demand. Human trafficking is a crime also fueled by substantial profits, high demand of sex buying (Ali, 2009; Durchslag & Goswami, 2008; Farley et al., 2011; Hunt, 2013; Shively, Kliorys, Wheeler, & Hunt, 2012), and cheap labor (Siddharta, 2011). Victims of forced labor are typically not paid, or paid just enough for their subsistence (Belser, 2005).

Women and girls living in communities with economies that rely on the sex industry are at higher risk for sex trafficking (Reid, 2012). Therefore, to understand profits and cycles of demand for sex trafficking, it is important to consider the sex industry, as it is one place where traffickers exploit people.
One study that interviewed pimps \((n = 73)\) serving a jail sentence found that, in 2007, the underground sex economies of Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Miami, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington, DC, each generated between $40 million and $290 million (Dank, 2014). Overall, individual pimp/trafficker profits were notably high, with an average weekly cash income of $32,833 in Atlanta, $11,129 in San Diego, and $11,588 in Washington, DC (Dank, 2014). And a recent study of online sales of sex in three regions of Massachusetts, which analyzed 18,000 sex ads during a 3-month period, conservatively estimated that $2.5 million in profit were generated through online transactions (Wightman, Contreras, Lemos, & Bach, 2016).

Human trafficking for manual labor in the United States is also thought to be driven by the demand for less expensive goods, products, and services (National Human Trafficking Resource Center, 2015). For example, some companies decrease high employee costs by subcontracting companies that hire per diem workers; these workers have limited or no worker benefits, and minimal protections against exploitation, a trend believed to be related to a surge in reported cases of human trafficking in the hotel industry (Polaris Project, 2015).

Other industries where trafficking for manual labor is high include seasonal farm work, which contributed to the $28 billion dollar fruit and vegetable industry (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2012); the garment industry, which generated $6 billion dollars in exports (Joint Economic Committee, 2015); and food processing plants, with $538 billion in income (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008).

**Vulnerability related to debates about prostitution and sex trafficking.** Without a clear definition of trafficking it is difficult to identify trafficked people and those at risk (Gerassi, 2015; O’Connell Davidson, 2006). One of the challenges to define human trafficking is the considerable debate between groups representing two positions that define sex trafficking and prostitution as synonymous or different terms (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Trafficking of Women and Girls, 2014; Brysk, 2011; Chuang, 2006; Doezema, 2002; Gerassi, 2015; Worthen, 2011).

One position is that all prostitution is considered exploitative and equivalent to sex trafficking (Farley, 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Farley et al., 2003; Raymond, 2004); the other position is that prostitution should be viewed as a legitimate form of work that is potentially empowering and separate from human trafficking (Elrod, 2015; Weitzer, 2010).

Elrod (2015) argued that, although sex work advocates express some valid concerns to view these industries as separate, a clear link exists between prostitution and sex trafficking:

First, any form of commercial transaction for sex leads to an increase in market demand for sexual services. This demand for sexual services creates a “profit motive” that encourages individuals, including traffickers, to provide commercial sexual services. Finally, given the nature of the industry and established practices, traffickers often resort to exploitive tactics in order to find sex partners to meet this demand. Thus, as the prostitution industry as a whole goes, so goes sex trafficking. (p. 5)

Lavee’s (2016) study of Israeli mothers \((n = 50)\) living in poverty who exchanged sex for material resources sheds light on the complex structural factors that can sometimes push women into prostitution, and that contribute to invisible forms of coercion. Lavee identified a “slippery slope of dependency” (p. 84), where policies on the basis of neoliberal welfare reforms inadvertently transfer poor women’s dependency on the state to dependency on men’s resources:

Narrowing structures of opportunity for low-income women, and particularly mothers, as part of a neoliberal socio-economic policy, compels these women to apply oppressive survival strategies in order to obtain material resources. In the absence of other breadwinning routes, these women enter damaging arrangements wherein they use their bodies as a commodity, and frequently are even compelled to accept external demands for such arrangements. (p. 90–91)
Lavee (2016) considered, but rejected, the possibility that a negotiated sex exchange could represent a powerful position for women. On the basis of her analysis of gender in relation to the welfare state, she concluded that it irrevocably “weakens women and reinforces gender differences in social interactions” (p. 91).

Prostitution and sex trafficking are also often defined differently on the basis of the question of choice (Farley et al., 2003). Behavioral signs that the person appears to be involved in prostitution by their own choice suggests willful engagement in sex work. Yet, signs of coercion into prostitution suggest a lack of choice and, therefore, human trafficking. Positions that view prostitution and human trafficking as synonymous consider that people are pushed into prostitution because of a position of vulnerability, as Lavee’s (2016) study found. From this perspective, a person in prostitution could not have chosen to participate in her or his own exploitation, even if she or he reports volitional involvement (Farley, 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Farley et al., 2003; Raymond, 2004).

Social attitudes toward prostitution and sex trafficking also appear to contribute to the tendency to conflate and differentiate these terms. At least one study found that the term sex trafficking elicits empathic concern and ensuing prosocial behavior as opposed to the term prostitution, which elicited the least empathic concern among participants (Silver, Karakurt, & Boysen, 2015). Silver and colleagues found that belief in a just world, beliefs about prostitutes, and family values about prostitution influenced a participant’s level of empathic concern, which in turn influenced prosocial behavior.

Silver and colleagues’ study highlights the discourse of “good” versus “bad” that exists in relation to prostitution and sex trafficking (Srikantiah, 2007). A person involved in prostitution is construed as bad, because she or he makes an immoral choice to prostitute, and the trafficked person is good, because she or he is a victim. Polarizing discourse can affect antitrafficking efforts socially, as Silver and colleagues (2015) demonstrated, but also at the level of program development and funding. For example, internationally, some U.S. agencies impose antipropstitution provisions in grants for organizations working in countries where prostitution is legal (Kinney, 2006). Such provisions limit outreach to women in the sex industry, which forces organizations to overlook exploitation in vulnerable populations.

**Individual vulnerabilities.** Victims of human trafficking can be from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but globally, poverty remains a leading risk factor (Reid, 2012; Ribando Seelke, 2015; United Nations, 2014) A related trend is that international victims are often moved from poorer to richer destinations (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Persons of all genders and sexual orientations are targeted for human trafficking, but globally adult women remain the most affected group and account for nearly half of all identified victims of human trafficking; women and girls together represent 70% of identified trafficking cases (United Nations, 2014). In the United States, women and girls also comprise the majority of cases detected for sex trafficking, and transgender youth are overrepresented in sex trafficking (Stransky & Finkelhor, 2008). In trafficking for manual labor in the United States, women and girls are overwhelmingly identified as victims in cases of domestic servitude, especially in the homes of diplomatic families, and men are more commonly exploited in agricultural work (Freedom Network USA, 2013; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Individual circumstances become vulnerabilities to trafficking depending on a person’s more or less powerful status afforded by her or his particular race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, spiritual orientation, sexual orientation, ability level, and educational level, particularly as these interact with other traits less commonly noted (e.g., cultural ideologies, social practices, institutional impositions) that condone the marginalization, inequality, privilege, and submission of specific groups (Marecek, 2016).

The lack of social capital, for example, constitutes a complex risk factor that occurs when several contextual, structural, and individual vulnerabilities intersect. A meta-analysis of domestic and international studies found that vulnerability to trafficking increased when specific factors related to social capital were negatively altered in young adulthood (Reid, 2012).

For victims of human trafficking, having a family or child to support or being deserted by a
husband constitute notable risk factors. Language and cultural barriers and undocumented travel are additional vulnerabilities for international victims (Reid, 2012), as well as unemployment, illiteracy, running away from home, and homelessness (Ribando Seelke, 2015). Additional risk factors for domestic victims included unemployment and teen pregnancy. Other studies (Reid & Piquero, 2014) found that lower educational attainment and poor school performance (Reid, 2012) are associated with trafficking starting in later adolescence and early adulthood for all youth.

Persons of all races and ethnicities are at risk for trafficking (United Nations, 2014); however, notable trends do exist. For example, one study on trafficking of young men versus young women found that Black men are at greater risk of trafficking, whereas young women of all races and ethnicities had similar risk (Reid & Piquero, 2014). For international victims of human trafficking, indigenous ethnicity is a risk factor (Ribando Seelke, 2015; UNICEF, 2013). Other individual risk factors identified for domestic trafficking include early sexual experience, teenage arrest history, and a history of substance abuse (Reid, 2012; Reid & Piquero, 2014).

Vulnerabilities related to prior experiences of trauma. On the basis of her decades of work with trafficked girls, Lloyd (2015) pointed out that, all too often, human trafficking is viewed as an issue separate from gender-based violence and child abuse when, in fact, these occur as part of a continuum of violence and trauma. Trauma-related vulnerabilities to human trafficking studied in U.S. women and girls from various walks of life include a history of childhood sexual abuse (Macías Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Silbert & Pines, 1981; Widom & Kuhns, 1996), child maltreatment, family dysfunction, being in foster care, and intimate partner violence (Bruggeman & Keys, 2009; Lloyd, 2015; Reid, 2012). For women trafficked from other countries to the United States, some trauma-related risk factors include family crisis (e.g., sudden unemployment or illness; Reid, 2012) and a history of physical and sexual abuse (Ribando Seelke, 2015). Reid (2011) also found that childhood maltreatment predicts running away, which is a risk factor for trafficking, providing a good example of how multiple vulnerabilities can interact and create greater risk of trafficking.

Vulnerabilities related to disabilities. Although studies on risk for human trafficking for individuals with disabilities are lacking, globally individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are considered vulnerable to human trafficking (United Nations, 2014). Some victims may live with mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, mood, psychotic disorders), which have been found to increase vulnerability to human trafficking (Oram, Khondoker, Abas, Broadbent, & Howard, 2015; Reid & Piquero, 2014). Drug addiction constitutes a risk factor for trafficking of domestic and international victims (Ribando Seelke, 2015). In trafficking cases, drug addiction can be a condition that preexists trafficking or that developed via a trafficker’s enticement of victims to engage in drug use to cope with exploitation (Goldenberg et al., 2012).

In the next section, I describe the methods of recruitment that lead to human trafficking, which serves to expand a subsequent discussion on the need to define human trafficking.

Recruitment Methods

When human trafficking is sensationalized it is simplified and portrayed as a crime perpetrated by highly organized networks of traffickers on naive victims abducted or cheated into sex work or manual labor (Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005; Weitzer, 2015). Sensationalizing rhetoric served initially as a device used by antitrafficking stakeholders to draw public attention and funding to the issue, but now it hurts antitrafficking work, as it can affect efforts to identify victims. For example, if the public defines human trafficking as it is portrayed in Hollywood movies, the belief is that traffickers work within a sophisticated organized crime network and that victims are abducted and sold. This is a description fitting only the most extreme, and least common, cases in the United States (De Shalit, Heynen, & van der Meulen, 2014).

Small local operations. Domestic trafficking cases appear to be largely perpetrated by nonorganized individual traffickers (De Shalit et al., 2014).
Organized crime networks that traffic drugs and engage in other illegal activities in addition to human trafficking are more common in international cases (Aronowitz, 2001; Bruckert & Parent, 2002; U.S. Department of State, 2016), but trafficking by nonorganized individuals is also common internationally.

Cases included in the latest United Nations (2014) report on human trafficking are categorized as either small local operations, medium subregional operations, or large transnational operations. Examples of small local operations include an adolescent girl who is coerced into prostitution by one or a couple of individuals. Many cases of domestic sex trafficking of minors and some international trafficking to the United States, as described by several studies and reports, appear to follow the pattern for small local operations (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Gibbs, Walters, Lutnick, Miller, & Kluckman, 2015; Ugarte et al., 2003; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Small local operations typically involve short-distance movement (United Nations, 2014), as in the case of Amalia who moved on her own from the Midwest to the East Coast, where she was trafficked. One or few traffickers are involved in the exploitation. The number of victims in small local operations is typically also low. The trafficker will more commonly look like an exploitative intimate partner. Another characteristic of small local operations is that although the profits vary, they are generally limited, and financial investments made by the trafficker are also low. There are generally no travel documents required to cross borders between localities (e.g., between states in the United States). Finally, small local operations require very limited organization for the exploitation to be successful.

Feigned relationships. Recruitment through a feigned relationship is considered a small local operation, and commonly noted as the primary tactic used by nonorganized individual traffickers in the Americas to lure women and girls into trafficking (Dank, 2014; Lloyd, 2015; Reid, 2012; United Nations, 2014). In these cases, the trafficker feigns a romantic interest in the victim to gain her or his trust. Victims lured by traffickers with this tactic in the United States are commonly minors. The trafficker is typically a man and the victim is typically a woman. However, an associate female trafficker may first feign a friendship with the victim, and after gaining the victim's trust, introduce the victim to the male trafficker. Amalia's case followed this pattern: she travelled to the East Coast with a female friend, who introduced her to another female friend, who then introduced Amalia to a pimp.

Related to this last point, globally, most traffickers are men, yet about 43% of convicted traffickers in the regions of North and Central America and the Caribbean are women (United Nations, 2014). At least one study that reviewed legal cases involving female traffickers in the United States found that woman traffickers can play a central role in recruiting and exploiting women and girls (Roe-Sepowitz, Gallagher, Risinger, & Hickle, 2015).

As the trafficker develops a “relationship” with the victim, he manipulates or coerces her into some form of sexual exploitation, usually prostitution. People trafficked for domestic work are also pulled into a relationship by the trafficker. In the example of Ramya, she described her exploitative employers as caring. The trafficker retains most of the victim's profits from her or his work, in these cases. Ramya, for example, earned about $1/hr for her work in the couple’s home. And although the financial investments of a trafficker are small, the time and energy she or he invests to carry out the relational ploys can be substantial.

It is common, for example, for traffickers to shower the women and girls they traffic with time, attention, and gifts (Pierce, 2012). Trafficked girls describe that the trafficker listened to them, took the time to get to know them, and made them feel loved. For many victims, the trafficker gives them the relational experiences they had longed for amidst chaotic, neglecting, and sometimes abusive home environments and situations. The trafficker will typically escalate threats and use of violence only after the victim trusts and has fallen in love with the trafficker (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003; Pierce, 2012).

Overlaps between the dynamics of human trafficking and intimate partner violence are notable and receiving more attention (Lloyd, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz, Hickle, Dahlstedt, & Gallagher, 2014; Verhoeven, van Gestel, de Jong, & Kleemans, 2015).
In Amalia’s case, her interactions with Henry highlight this point well—he romanced her like a boyfriend would. The victim’s reaction to the trafficker’s violence is typically one of confusion and she or he usually does not try to escape, even if the opportunity exists. If she or he does eventually exit or escape, the victim will also very likely return to the trafficker several times (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010; Reid, 2013b); one study found recurrence rates of 69% to 83% among trafficked youth (Reid & Piquero, 2014).

International trafficking cases carried out by small local operations unfold similarly to U.S. domestic trafficking cases, especially in the beginning stages. The trafficker is typically a local man or from a neighboring town who pretends to be in love with the victim, gains her or his trust, and arranges for her or his travel to the United States. Shortly after entering the United States, the victim is commonly sold to a brothel owner and forced to work in prostitution (O’Neill Richard, 2000). International victims of sex trafficking are typically moved between several U.S. cities like New York, Miami, and Las Vegas, among many others. Movement among these circuits varies depending on the relationship between the trafficker(s) and brothel owners. Rotation between brothels is thought to be done for multiple reasons, including offering clients “fresh faces,” keeping victims disoriented and from contacting law enforcement, and keeping victims from developing relationships with clients who could try to help them. As in domestic trafficking, the international small operation trafficker(s) retains the majority of profits. The case of Ramya, who was approached in India by a trusted family friend who introduced her to the U.S. couple that later exploited her, constitutes a good example of how relational ploys can also serve to recruit women overseas for trafficking for manual labor.

One notable difference between domestic and international trafficking cases is the duration of the romantic ploy. In domestic trafficking, the trafficker will usually need to maintain a long-term semblance of continued positive relationship or romantic interest in the victim for several reasons (Reid, 2013b). Domestic victims remain in their country, and are likely oriented to the surroundings and have greater possibility to access community, health, social, and legal resources to escape from the trafficking. Conversely, international victims of trafficking will be unfamiliar with the surroundings, undocumented, and with minimal possibility to access community, health, social, and legal resources on their own.

**TOWARD AN EVOLVING DEFINITION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Two major hurdles exist to comprehensively define human trafficking in the United States. The first, introduced earlier in this chapter, involves terms such as prostitution and sex trafficking that have caused considerable definition debates (Gerassi, 2015). Another is the TVPA (2000) definition of human trafficking that excludes cases where a non-exploitative relationship was established between the future trafficker and trafficked person, prior to trafficking (Reese, 2015). The relationship prior to trafficking is sometimes deceptively established by the trafficker, but other times it may also be a legitimate relationship, for example, when a victim is exploited by a partner or spouse, a parent, or other family members (Pierce, 2012). Verhoeven and colleagues (2015) concluded from a study of intimate partner violence and trafficking that intimate relationships often exist between traffickers and victims. Therefore, more attention to the relational aspects of trafficking is desirable as, “Aside from intimidation, control and violence, factors such as affection and attachment contribute to the persistence of these relationships” (p. 49).

Sophisticated and invisible coercion tactics serve to recruit and intensify the victim’s attachment to the trafficker, creating the possibility of exploiting the victim over a long period of time. In these cases, the victim’s attachment to the trafficker is strong enough to convince others, and herself, that she or he is a willing participant in the exploitative relationship (Contreras et al., 2017). This belief will keep her or him hidden in plain sight (Herman, 2004). Therefore, increased understanding about trafficker tactics will require the current definitions of human trafficking to evolve to include complex dynamics that contribute to these psychological forms of coercion.
Coercion in Trafficking Victims Protection Act

The TVPA definition of human trafficking requires that the trafficked person be deceived, and then coerced with force, into a situation of exploitation (Reese, 2015). As noted previously, TVPA’s three main terms—force, fraud, and coercion—were legally constructed, and here lies the second challenge in defining human trafficking in the United States. Coercion, in U.S. law, is largely understood as requiring physical restraint coupled with threats of harm. However, traffickers all too often use deception and psychological coercion to control their victims (Reese, 2015). Recent studies on human trafficking perpetration found that traffickers present with high levels of psychopathy categorized as either “aggressive/antisocial” or “charismatic/manipulative” (Hargreaves-Cormany, Patterson, & Muirhead, 2016). Hargreaves-Cormany and colleagues identified that violent charismatic or manipulative traffickers posed the greatest threat to the victim and society. They often combine caring behaviors with use of physical violence to control the victim, and in some cases use of violence may be completely absent. Additionally, the authors surmise that this type of trafficker is likely to have high levels of intelligence, especially effective social skills, which facilitate perpetration and evading law enforcement. TVPA’s current definition of coercion requires “a ‘taking’ by deception, [but] it is not clear whether sophisticated trickery, characteristic of manipulative/charismatic traffickers, is enough to constitute a coercive ‘holding’” (Reese, 2015, p. 277).

Reauthorizations of TVPA (2003, 2005, 2008) have clarified the law’s conceptualization of coercion, and efforts to broaden the scope of TVPA are likely due to the significant challenges U.S. courts have encountered in prosecuting traffickers (Halter, 2010; Reid, 2013a). TVPA (2000) was limited in scope to a case law, United States v. Kozinski (1988), which was tried on the basis of criminal charges for involuntary servitude (Maynard, 2002). The courts understood Kozinski-type coercion as use of, or threat of, physical restraint or injury. The TVPA amendment recognized that Kozinski-type coercion could be absent in modern trafficking cases, even while other committed acts continued to constitute a breach of the law. In its amended form, forced labor could be proven with one of three possible scenarios that, together, constitute TVPA’s current definition of coercion:

(1) threats of “serious harm” to or physical restraint against that person or a third person; (2) by any plan or pattern intended to cause the person to believe that if the person failed to perform the services, that person or another person would suffer “serious harm” or physical restraint; or (3) by means of abuse or threatened abuse of law or legal process. (Maynard, 2002, p. 17)

In the amendment, “serious harm” was no longer limited to “physical harm but also included non-physical intimidation, such as economic and cultural coercion” (Maynard, 2002, p. 17). Later reauthorizations of TVPA continued to refine the definition of coercion, and more recently included reference to psychological coercion (Nack, 2010).

The shifts in TVPA legislation reflect the onerous task of developing a definition of coercion that can accurately reflect human trafficking. Although more pointed terms such as cultural coercion and psychological coercion are noted, they are also only broadly defined; thus, the question of how specifically coercion unfolds in cases of human trafficking remains. Even with the noted TVPA revisions, it remains difficult to criminalize all activities that could be defined as sex trafficking (Elrod, 2015) and prosecute cases of domestic servitude (Kim, 2011).

Whereas international agreements on human trafficking, like the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000), consider additional means of trafficking (e.g., the abuse of a position of vulnerability and of power), federal law only considers “severe sex trafficking” as a crime punishable by law. Therefore, Elrod (2015) stated, “absent evidence of force, fraud, or coercion, the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of an individual [18] years of age or older for commercial sexual activities is not a criminal activity under TVPA” (p. 3). The rigorous requirements of TVPA, Elrod argued, make sex trafficking cases especially difficult
to prove and prosecute. It encourages prosecutors to only take so-called “slam-dunk” cases, where either the abuse was so extreme that force, fraud, and coercion are undeniable, or when the victim is a child.

**Inclusion of Psychological Coercion to Understand Human Trafficking**

Traffickers rely heavily on psychologically coercive tactics to recruit and exploit women and girls in sex trafficking. Therefore, understanding psychological coercion is an important step to address the large numbers of women and girls targeted for sex trafficking.

One way to understand the feigned relationship in cases of human trafficking, and other similar trafficker tactics, is as a form of psychological coercion. However, the legal definition of human trafficking does not describe the dynamics that unfold between trafficker and trafficked person. Related to this gap, the victim’s invisibility, during and post–human trafficking, seems to grow alongside a trafficker’s reliance on more psychologically coercive tactics.

With the use of related concepts and case examples mentioned earlier, the following section deconstructs how psychological coercion can render a victim of human trafficking invisible.

**Physical coercion and the iconic victim.** Human trafficking cases where the trafficker uses force as her or his primary means to exploit the victim can be understood within TVPA’s (2000) definition. Physical evidence of the use of force to coerce the victim to comply (e.g., bruising, malnourishment, broken bones) will likely exist. The victim will also very likely express feeling aggrieved and with an urgency to distance herself or himself as much as possible from the trafficker.

Most human traffickers are tried for other crimes perpetrated under the umbrella of human trafficking (e.g., rape, fraud, drug trafficking; Angel, 2007; Reid, 2013a). However, because Magda’s case possessed all the characteristics of Srikantiah’s (2007) iconic victim construct, it was considered for prosecution for human trafficking. Ample physical evidence existed of the abuses she endured. She has been abducted and transported in the back of a truck through Mexico. After her rescue Magda wanted to distance herself from her traffickers; she was understandably terrified of them and she made no effort to return to them. In other words, she had not formed a confusing attachment with her traffickers that compelled her to want to return, as is often the case for victims of trafficking lured by a feigned relationship.

The iconic victim construct contains all the characteristics needed to prosecute a case of human trafficking under current legislation: (a) Magda was a woman or girl (as opposed to a man) trafficked for sexual exploitation, (b) she was assessed to be a good witness, (c) she cooperated with law enforcement to advance the criminal investigation, and (d) she did not escape or exit trafficking on her own but was rescued by another party.

**Psychological coercion and the overlooked victim.** Most women and girls trafficked in the Americas do not bear the iconic victim characteristics Srikantiah outlined (Reid, 2012; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2015; United Nations, 2014). On the basis of the sharp divide that exists between the traits expected of a human trafficking victim and the victim’s actual presentation, an alternative formulation of human trafficking that counters the assumptions of the iconic victim construct is needed. The construct I propose is that of the overlooked victim of human trafficking.

Amalia’s experience of trafficking followed the route of a romantic ploy, and is a good example of the overlooked victim in sex trafficking. The trafficker’s use of psychologically coercive tactics made the exploitation invisible to others and to the victim. Amalia noted that Henry told her he had lost money in his business and needed her help. When Amalia refused, she noted that Henry raped her. Amalia said that she thought about going to the police but feared that she would be questioned about her involvement in prostitution. Amalia explained that she was very confused, “I didn’t understand what was happening and so I just gave in to what he wanted.” Amalia soon realized that Henry had two friends who also had “girlfriends.” She noted that she stayed with Henry for three more years.

Amalia stated, “It was a nightmare. He took all the money I made and spent it on other girls. He
beatin the time because I didn’t want to pros-
titute for him the way I had for Mario. I explained
that it was different with him, that I thought he
was my boyfriend, not a pimp. I loved him but
one day I had had enough and I left.” Amalia
remained unsure about how to define her experi-
ence with Henry: “I still don’t know if Henry was
my boyfriend, or a pimp who pretended to be my
boyfriend. It’s very confusing.” Amalia also noted
that a year after leaving Henry she had seen a medi-
cal doctor: “I told her some of what happened with
Henry and she gave me a domestic violence hotline
number.”

The overlooked victim is one who, like Amalia,
(a) appears to be in a consensual relationship with
the trafficker, as a result of the trafficker’s use of
manipulation and psychological coercion; (b) avoids
law enforcement; (c) in the case of sex trafficking,
is commonly a woman, but not always cisgender3
(transgender women are also highly vulnerable to
exploitation); (d) escapes or exits trafficking on her
or his own; (e) may have been subjected to multiple
forms of exploitation; and (f) is usually visible to the
public and engages in occasional interaction with
community, health, and other systems.

Most women and girls described in human traf-
ficking studies possess the overlooked victim char-
acteristics described in Amalia’s case (Reid, 2012,
2013a, 2013b; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2015). They were
not abducted, and their traffickers seduced them
into relationships that later became exploitative.
Many were afraid of cooperating with law enforce-
ment, and those who agreed to work with law
enforcement did so reluctantly.

International victims are required to participate
in their trafficker’s prosecution to receive services
and stabilize their immigration status (Ribando
Seelke, 2015; Rieger, 2007). And domestic victims
commonly run from placements and shelters when
they feel too pressured to cooperate with law
enforcement. International victims are often initially
recruited for restaurant, hotel, or domestic work,
and then either suffer sexual exploitation while
working those jobs or are routed fully into prostit-
tion (Ribando Seelke, 2015).

Most domestic victims are not rescued. In fact,
many are arrested and charged with prostitution,
and only later identified by social services providers
as potential victims of human trafficking (Reid,
2013a; Stransky & Finkelhor, 2008). Others leave
their traffickers on their own and exit trafficking
permanently after receiving supportive services
(Baker et al., 2010). Another group, the most mis-
understood in my opinion, become stuck in a cycle
of leaving and returning to their trafficker(s), an
issue extensively noted in the trafficking literature
(Raphael, Reichert, & Powers, 2010; Reid, 2010).

Related to the gender and sexual orientation
of the overlooked victim construct, an increase in
identification of transgender women trafficked from
Latin America by traffickers using romantic ploys
has been noted in international cases, and domesti-
cally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth
remain a vulnerable group (Martinez & Kelle, 2013;
U.S. Department of State, 2016). Overlooked victims
do not appear to be under the total control of their
trafficker, which quickly dissuades law enforcement
from pursuing prosecutions. In such cases, tangible
evidence needed to prove the coercion of the victim
(e.g., physical signs of abuse, rape kit results) typi-
cally is not available. The overlooked victim may
also be missed by health care and social services
providers who mistakenly screen for intimate part-
ner violence and not human trafficking, or settle on
the basis that she or he is willingly prostituting and
therefore not requiring additional attention.

Coercion in cases of trafficking for manual
labor. Most commonly overlooked is trafficking
for manual labor, and psychological coercion can
be present in these cases too, such as Ramya’s situ-
ation. Her traffickers, a young professional couple,
used fraud (the promise of a well-paid job working
in their home in the United States) to recruit her in
India. Later, after Ramya became aware that she was
tricked, she was not paid what she was promised
and she was prohibited from contact with others;
her traffickers used subtle threats of deportation
to maintain her cooperation. The victim in these
cases is generally out of public view. Therefore, fear

3According to the Oxford English Dictionary, cisgender is defined as “denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender
corresponds with their birth sex.”
instilled by the trafficker is unlikely to be witnessed by onlookers who could potentially interrupt the exploitation. In this scenario, isolation and fear of escaping renders the trafficked person invisible to others and she or he becomes an overlooked victim.

One highly publicized case of trafficking for manual labor occurred in 2008 in a Postville, Iowa, kosher meat processing plant raid, where 389 workers (men, women, and children) were detained for using false social security numbers (Jones, 2012). The general consensus among immigration activists and professionals was that the plant workers, mostly from Guatemala and other Central American countries, were unjustly criminalized. Following the workers’ arrest, overwhelming evidence of exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking existed that had eluded detection and report to authorities.

**CONCLUSION**

Continued evolution of a definition of human trafficking is a difficult but necessary task. A first step toward that end is to connect how human trafficking is rooted in slavery, as outlined in this chapter. I clarified how—as a modern form of slavery—human trafficking bears multiple similar characteristics to its predecessor.

Additionally, the factors that make a person vulnerable to human trafficking are complex, and so are the internal and external circumstances that compel a victim to remain trafficked, even when the opportunity to physically leave exists. Therefore, the question of “choice” as the factor that determines if a woman is prostituted or trafficked, which has been a point of substantial debate, seems less important than recognizing that multiple forms of oppression intersect to make people vulnerable to exploitative situations.

Studies are still needed that generate human trafficking concepts on the basis of the lived experiences of people who self-identify as trafficked or otherwise, and those that endure experiences of exploitation but have not adopted the terms used by academics, advocacy groups, and others. The goal, as Estes (2008) noted, is to ensure that the experiences of trafficked people are not occluded by the theories and statistics. Promising psychological concepts should also be studied in relation to human trafficking. For example, internalized oppression (David, 2014)—an inner set of self-defeating and self-punishing cognitions, behaviors, and attitudes that develop in relation to an environment that is consistently oppressive—could help explain the complex psychological dynamics present in human trafficking. A pressing need exists for policies in the United States to adopt a human rights approach that makes resources and services available to all persons experiencing exploitation, irrespective of the language they use to self-define their experience (e.g., trafficked, prostituted, sex worker).

Finally, on the basis of the historical, psychological, and social issues related to human trafficking reviewed in this chapter, I proposed the following psychosocial—historical definition: Human trafficking is rooted in similar social issues that fueled, for more than two centuries, the institution of slavery on the American continent. Today, human traffickers use sophisticated and often hard-to-detect forms of physical and psychological coercion to exploit their victims. And coercion is further strengthened by isolating societal stigma toward vulnerable people involved in the legal and illegal sex industries, as well as other normalized forms of worker exploitation.

**References**


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